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OR, THE RELENTLESS SHADOWER.

A History of the Willard Mystery.

BY JACKSON KNOX (*Old Hawk*),
AUTHOR OF "HAWK HERON, THE FALCON DE-
TECTIVE," "NIXEY'S NIP," "THE SALA-
MANDER DETECTIVE," "THE ROCKET
DETECTIVE," "THE CIRCUS DE-
TECTIVE," "CAPTAIN CLEW,"
"MAGIC DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONCEALED WITNESS.

MR. STEPHEN GRAY was a retired detective policeman, sojourning for the summer, with his daughter and only child, Edna, at an old-fashioned farm-house in Purchase, within view of St. Mary's Lake, and not more than a couple of miles northeast of White Plains, Westchester county, New York.

One bright July afternoon, while seated within the vine-shaded north piazza of the farm-house, Mr. Gray's attention was attracted to a middle-aged man, of rather fashionable ap-

THE
RETIRED DETECTIVE

HOLDING ALOFT HER HAND, THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER TOOK THE OATH NEVER TO CONSCIOUSLY REVEAL WHAT SHE HAD SEEN AND OVERHEARD.

Springsteel Steve.

pearance, who was strolling leisurely up the road.

"Oho! Mr. Red O'Meara in these parts?" muttered the old detective, rubbing his glasses and continuing his scrutiny. "I wonder if he can be summering hereabouts, and, if so, what can be his game, at present?"

"What is it, father?" said a melodious voice at his elbow; and then his daughter, who had intruded sufficiently unperceived to catch some of the soliloquized words, also followed with her eyes the object of her father's attention, who was by this time turning down an unfrequented road leading toward the lake. "Ah, I have noticed that gentleman once or twice before. Is he known to you, father?"

"Rather, and not for much good, either, my dear. I wonder if he is boarding in the neighborhood?"

"Perhaps so, or maybe in White Plains. Who is he?"

"A bad man."

"Oh, but you know or recollect so many bad men, father, that that is no answer at all. What is his name?"

"Red O'Meara."

"Well, his hair and mustache were red," with a light laugh. "I could have half-guessed the name for myself."

"Otherwise Lawrence, or Larry."

"Oh, thank you. Now we are getting down to hard-pan. What does he do?"

"Beyond gambling, playing confidence-man, selling theater tickets and living generally on his wits, with perhaps a little bunco-steering, check-charming and house-breaking thrown in by way of variety, I really don't know, my dear."

She burst into a ringing laugh.

"Is it possible that that is *all*? Why, he must be a sort of Admirable Crichton of knaves, father. Well, by-by; and be careful not to drink the dairy dry before my return."

"Are you off for one of your long strolls, Edna?"

She nodded, and threw a kiss to him from under her broad hat, as she passed down the garden path, looking the picture of health, beauty and maidenly robustness at nineteen or twenty, and with an unmistakable New York City air, in spite of her rustic but perfectly-fitting costume of inexpensive material.

"Be careful to be back before dusk and not lose your way, as you did once before, my daughter!" he called after her, with a glint of fatherly pride behind his glasses; and then she was gone.

Three hours later, Edna Gray found herself in an uncomfortable state of mind.

Twilight was fast closing and thickening around her, she was far from home on an unfrequented road, and, what was still worse, she had undeniably lost her way.

For twenty minutes, in fact, since she had first begun to realize her predicament, not a house of encouraging aspect had been in view, nor had she met a single person of whom she could inquire her lost way.

Nothing but gloomy woods, darkening pasture-lots and lonely fields, with their interminable half-ruinous stone fences, and the weed-grown, wildflower-peeping road-sides, which, under happier circumstances, would have given her so much gratification, but which were now but part and parcel of her misfortune.

She quickened her pace, but the dusk came down so quickly as to mock her, and, being a city-bred girl, she was soon a prey to vague terrors that few of the farmer young women round-about could have well understood.

At last, however, much to her relief, she came to an ornamental but greatly-neglected hedge-line, and then, a little further on, to a broad and handsome, but also greatly-neglected, carriage and foot way combined.

"It must lead to some retired gentleman's country house," she thought. "I can't do better than seek for information there, and perhaps even be invited to a drive home. This is very fortunate!"

But it was just the reverse of that, as the event was to prove; and, all unknowing and unsuspecting, she turned up the driveway with a rapid and confident step.

Thick evergreens screened the view on either side, and presently she began to experience an unaccountable feeling of fear, as of some dimly-threatening evil.

In fact, she had not proceeded more than fifty rods before this strange uneasiness had so far mastered her that she felt more than half-disposed to turn and take to her heels.

"This is ridiculous!" she said to herself. "I am not a child, and ought to be ashamed of such causeless timidity. I will master it, and I will go on!"

And she did go on, but only a rod or two further, when she caught the sound of hoof-beats and wheels—doubtless of a briskly-driven carriage from where the house ought to be somewhere up at the head of the drive.

Now this was just the sort of encounter, apparently, that she had been praying for: but her unaccountable nervousness had by this time completely overpowered her reasoning faculties.

She turned on the instant, and took to flight.

Something whispered, "I must *not* be overtaken by that vehicle! I don't know why, but it simply *must not* happen!" and this was her mysterious controlling force.

But the equipage had evidently quickened its pace at the same moment, and would undoubtedly overtake her before she could reach the public road again.

Having fairly surrendered to her irrational terror, it was now her complete tyrant.

She could almost have shrieked as she ran, and yet the team was momently gaining upon her.

At last she descried a narrow opening in the evergreens to the right, and unhesitatingly dashed into it.

It proved to be a footpath, and, without thinking to what it might lead, she pursued it at an accelerated rather than an abated speed; for it seemed to her, though somewhat confusedly, that the vehicle she had been endeavoring to escape had come to a sudden pause at the entrance to the same path.

Presently there could no longer be a question of it.

Footsteps—some springing yet stealthy, others heavy and shuffling as if embarrassed by some burden—were following down the path.

Edna hurried on, the stars and newly risen moon now lending her their soft but sufficient light.

At last she came to a comparatively open space near a little tinkling brook, at the bottom of a broad, deep, heavily-wooded hollow.

Here she had just time to crouch in concealment behind some friendly thick growing shrubbery before the mysterious footsteps were upon her latest tracks.

Edna was passionately fond of poetry, and instinctively at this critical moment, the opening lines of Tennyson's *Maud* came thronging into her mind:

"I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribbed ledges dip with a silent horror of blood,
And echo there, whatever is asked her, answers
"Death!"
For There in a ghastly pit—"

But at this profoundly appropriate juncture the owners of the footsteps came into view.

There were four masked men, two who came first, and two that followed, carrying between them a long rounded something rolled up in a dark-colored rug.

The unsuspected observer shuddered, for a sort of instinct told her that that something was a dead human body.

In addition to their burden, which they at once set down at the foot of a blasted and lifeless tree, indicated by the elder and more commanding of the two others, the bearers carried spades.

"This will answer," said the leader, in a low voice, as he measured off a space in the soft turf a few paces from where the burden had been laid. "See with what dispatch you chaps can finish the job now."

Without a word in reply, the men addressed wiped their foreheads above the borders of their half-masks, spat on their hands, and set to work digging a long, deep trench, while the others drew somewhat apart.

They were so near to Edna's hiding-place that she could note them distinctly.

Both were better dressed and of higher bearing than the trench-diggers, who seemed common enough sort of men. He who appeared the master-spirit of what was on foot was much the elder of the pair, to judge by the close-cut, reddish beard and mustache that were visible below his mask. He was powerfully made, and so stockily set as to seem shorter than he really was;

while there was a suggestion of cynical harshness and cruelty in his brusque peremptoriness of speech and manner. His companion was evidently a very young man, perhaps of little more than age, with a smooth, handsome chin, and a jetty silken mustache that seemed to hide a mouth suggestive of both irresolution and a dangerous temper. His figure was slender and elegant, his hands white and woman-like, and there was something both shrinking and defiant in his demeanor toward his companion.

"You think they will keep faith, Harper, and make off for foreign parts without delay?" asked the elder of the pair, with a sign toward the laborers.

"They've got to," replied 'Harper,' sullenly, and yet in a very melodious voice. "Though you were the principal in this miserable affair, Swart and Timmins did the actual work, and would be the ones on whom a first suspicion would naturally fall."

The other laughed unpleasantly.

"Aren't you forgetting *yourself*," said he—"that is your own position, in case the three of us should take it into our heads to lump testimony against you?"

"No, I'm not!" growled Harper, in seeming terror and rage. "Curse you, O'Meara! aren't you content with having been the evil genius of my ruined life, that you should want to fasten even *this* horror upon me?"

"Tush, man! fastening nothing!" replied

O'Meara (how the listening girl had started at the recurrence of that name!) more kindly. "We're all of us perfectly safe for months, perhaps years, to come."

"I only hope so."

"Why, you ought to *know* it. The miserable old miser won't be missed, simply because he's universally supposed to be far away on one of his periodical treasure-seeking crazes."

"That certainly is the most hopeful feature of the affair."

"Swart goes to sea, and Timmins out West, eh?"

"No; just the other way. It's Timmins that's the sailor."

"You're right; I had forgotten. Well, with their shares of the swag, they can afford to run, and their individual safety can be trusted to seal their lips forever. Now, as to our movements?"

"What of them?" with angry impatience. "I thought you had decided on Belgium as *your* retreat."

"So I had—about."

"Mine then, as I told you, shall be Montevideo—Uruguay being likewise a non-extradition country, should the worst come to the worst."

"True, and excellent—temporarily! But, where and when shall we two meet again?"

"Never! Wherefore should we?"

"Because I wish it. Frank Harper, I'm fonder of you than you can conceive; and no man or woman that my peculiar fondness ever fastened itself upon has ever succeeded in disassociating his or her career from mine."

This was said in a smooth and agreeable tone that, nevertheless, betrayed a menacing undercurrent.

Harper seemed to shake off a sort of cowed feeling with some difficulty, and answered coldly:

"It is best for both of us, O'Meara, that our ways should henceforth lie widely separated. It shall be so, too; or I am still no better than the weak tool you have so long made of me."

O'Meara's eyes glistened unpleasantly through his mask, but before he could answer, if such were his intention, one of the diggers called out that the trench was completed.

The two men ceased their consultation on the instant, and advanced, the former with a resumption of his brusque, authoritative air.

Approaching the object in the rug, he mutely assigned each to a special corner, taking one himself, and together they lifted the burden, and silently proceeded with it toward the trench.

Whether from nervousness or some other cause, Harper, however, slipped and stumbled; O'Meara uttered a malediction; and the bundle, unrolling as it tumbled to the earth, revealed its contents as the corpse of an aged man, with wide-staring eyes, and blood-dabbled white beard.

At this juncture the horrified young lady started up out of her concealment, with a wild exclamation, and then sunk down in a semi-swoon.

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE SUSPENSE.

WHEN Edna Gray recovered consciousness it was to find herself sitting, gagged and bound, with her back against a tree at the edge of the hollow, and the four men confronting her with lowering and menacing looks.

Indeed, she was certain she read her death-warrant in all the masked faces, except perhaps that of young Harper, whose face and eyes, or what she could see of them, seemed rather troubled and alarmed than wholly angry and pitiless.

The corpse of the murdered man, of which she could no longer have a doubt, had been wrapped up anew, and deposited in the grave, but was not yet covered with earth.

"She's coming to," said the elder of the grave-diggers. "You give her the one that's necessary, Timmins."

The younger man, thus addressed, had his spade in the air, as if he had been in the act of striking the unintentional witness of the crime a fatal blow, but was suddenly arrested and disconcerted by the opening of her eyes.

"Do it yourself, Swart!" he muttered, lowering the spade with an oath. "She's too sweet and innocent-looking, and I once had a sister with eyes just like those of hers."

"Coward!" and Swart himself raised his spade aloft.

But something in the girl's blanched face and mutely entreating eyes seemed to make him lose heart for the deed, too. At all events, he put down the weapon, and began to swear instead of striking, much to the sneering amusement of Timmins.

At last O'Meara, whose pitiless basilisk eyes had been dolefully regarding the captive through his mask, lost patience.

"Be quick about it, you cowardly muffs!" he exclaimed, commandingly. "The devil! if you'd have hesitated this time over the miser, he'd be polluting the air with his avaricious breath at this moment, and we the poorer by as many thousands as were gained."

"The miser was asleep, though," growled Timmins.

"If I had my way," muttered Swart, "she'd be in yonder, with him!"—with a motion of his

hand toward the still yawning, though tenanted grave.

"You've got your way, you idiot! Why don't you make way with the girl, then?"

"Oh!" with a chuckle, after another half-hearted flourish of the spade; "it might be takin' an unfair advantage of *you*, Mr. O'Meara."

"That's true," interposed Timmins. "We're no hogs to allers insist on the skipper's berth when it comes to blood-lettin'."

O'Meara angrily thrust them aside, confronting the dumb, despairing girl with relentless eyes, and suddenly a bright dagger glistened in his hand.

But at this juncture, the young man to whom Edna's eloquent eyes and ashy face had been specially appealing from the first, stepped impulsively forward, laying a restraining hand on O'Meara's shoulder.

"It must not be!" he said, quietly.

O'Meara had wheeled upon him like a baffled tiger.

"What is it you say—you?" he snarled.

"Simply, that I won't have it."

"Oh! you won't have it?"

"That is what I said, O'Meara. Enough crime has been done already. The young lady is, apparently, a boarder from one of the farmers' houses round about, who was probably here by accident."

"But who could, nevertheless, hang us with her testimony!"

"Not necessarily. At all events, I shall not consent to her murder."

"Oh! you won't? Perhaps, then," with a sneer, "you will suggest an equally effectual mode of securing her silence?"

The young man paused, and he seemed to reflect.

"She can be sworn to keep our secret," said he, at last.

"A woman keep a secret—and such a secret? No, no! Don't be a fool, Harper. As dead men tell no tales, neither can dead women to men's destruction."

"That's the ticket!" put in the sailor, in an audible aside. "Most likely she'd blab."

O'Meara impatiently shook off the restraining touch, and again his poniard flashed murderously.

But Harper this time thrust him firmly to one side and drew a revolver, with which he stepped before the threatened victim.

"Stand back, O'Meara!" he exclaimed; "here is a weapon that you know me to be master of, and I've been your willing instrument long enough."

O'Meara glared, but at the same time seemed to wish to temporize.

"You may regret this interposition, Frank," said he. "Perhaps," with a fresh sneer, "you'd even like to undo the work yonder?" nodding toward the grave."

"Not I! He was a useless, cruel and miserly wretch, better out of the world than in it. This is quite different."

Harper then quietly took the knife out of O'Meara's hand, cut the captive's bonds, relieved her of the gag, restored the knife, and then politely assisted the young lady to her feet.

Edna at once clasped her hands, and, but for her deliverer's restraining gesture, would have thrown herself on her knees before them all.

"Oh, indeed, indeed I didn't mean to spy on you!" she murmured, in an agony of fear. "I'm a boarder at Mr. Webb's in Purchase, where you are boarding?" he asked, with equal shortness, when they had reached the broad, moonlighted driveway.

He listened in moody silence, and they were soon once more on the lonesome public road, into which he had turned with an assured step, as of one familiar with the country.

Edna Gray was of a sensitiveness and impressibility that were at variance with her robust and hardy physique. The latter had quickly rallied from the effects of her recent shock, while her nervous and spiritual organization was still palpitating with pain, and craving comfort in the shape of soothing converse and sympathetic feeling.

She could even turn to her companion in this spirit, notwithstanding that she believed him the hand-in-glove associate of murderers, if not an actual murderer himself, and that he inspired her with a sense of more or less horror in consequence.

Still, he was evidently a young man of such different mold, and—had he not nobly interposed to save her life at the risk of his own?"

"Are we far from Mr. Webb's, sir?" she ventured at last, after they had proceeded for some time in silence.

"Three miles, at least."

"Had I, indeed, strayed so far away?"

"It looks like it."

"They will be wild with anxiety over me, and my father will be angry. I shall be more careful in the future."

"A good resolution!"

Presently they came to a swampy spot of the road, at which Edna had much difficulty by reason of her skirts, which she strove to hold up out of the mire, while cautiously choosing her steps.

Harper offered her his arm, and it was declined with a shudder that seemed to both sadden and anger him.

"You deem me a murderer, and of course it's all right!" he muttered, half to himself.

"Aren't you one?" she exclaimed, eagerly, as they came to a momentary pause beyond the swampy spot. "Oh! only assure me that you're not—that you were only the partial accomplice of those terrible men by chance, by accident, by fatality!"

He was young, and had doubtless before this remarked how handsome she was. But he now stood regarding her with a new gravity in the melancholy gaze that looked out at her through his mask.

"Why should you care?" he asked.

"Oh, I do care, sir! You have saved my

life—I am more than grateful. I would be a friend, sister to you, if—if I could!" And the shuddering fear was again in her face and eyes.

CHAPTER III.

A MOONLIGHT WALK.

"You can't be one or the other," replied Edna's strange companion, "so that's an end of it." And they resumed their way.

The young girl was sick at heart, for from these words she was compelled to argue that the young man could not truthfully assure her that he was other than a murderer.

"Pray don't think, though," he presently broke out, with his characteristic abruptness, "that your words are wholly thrown away on me. It is not so; I thank you, and am grateful."

"Say at least, then, that you are sorry for the crime that must have caused that old man's death."

"The crime is done—is beyond recall."

"But you are remorseful for his death?"

"Not a bit of it. He was a miser—a cruel, heartless, relentless old scoundrel, without a redeeming trait!"

"Oh! but yet a human being?"

He shrugged his shapely shoulders.

"The deuce! so were once the devils in—the unmentionable place, if we are told aright."

"Ah! that you believe in, at all events, which is something."

"What that?"

"The Hereafter."

"No, I don't. That for the hereafter!" and he snapped his fingers contemptuously.

Edna Gray was an unassumingly pious young woman, and she looked at him with pitying horror.

"I am very—very sorry to hear such words from you, Mr. Harper!" and there was a half-sob in her voice.

The young man was not unmoved.

"I am sorry to have made you sorry," said he. "But, tell me why you are sorry."

"Because you have saved my life, and because I would wish you to believe in the good and the religious, even though you may not have been good in your past life."

"That's kind of you, anyway."

"What do you believe in, sir?"

"Not much of anything, I'm afraid. That is, I'm what they call a disbeliever. I believe in only what I know, or what can be known."

Grieved at her companion's skepticism, Edna said no more.

Indeed, she was astonished to have talked as she had with this man so soon after the all but paralyzing situation from which she had but just emerged.

"Was this your first visit to Bleak Hollow?" her companion suddenly asked—the question chiming strangely with her mental recurrence to the recent scene.

"Bleak Hollow! is that the name of the locality?"

"No matter," in chagrin at having unwittingly betrayed even so much. "It was your first visit to that neighborhood."

"Heavens, yes! and I trust it shall prove my last."

"A good idea! Put the thought back from you, henceforth—strive to think of it all as only a hideous dream."

Edna did not answer, but came to a sudden pause, trembling violently.

She was of delicate fiber, strangely susceptive and impressionable. All her life she had been subject to a recurrence of wonderfully vivid mental pictures, usually the life-like repetition of the latest substantial experience most profoundly impressed upon her consciousness; and her father, who was a powerful mesmerizer, had, indeed, not infrequently found in his beautiful daughter a most satisfactory, if not so willing, subject for the exercise of this as yet little understood faculty.

Such a recurrence of the ghastly scene in the Hollow was now upon the young girl, and she trembled like an aspen.

"What is it?" demanded the young man, earnestly.

"I don't exactly know," she faltered, reaching out helplessly with her hands. "The terrible thing seems before me again. I am not given to fainting, and yet—"

With quiet firmness, which she now had neither the will nor the desire to resist, he drew her hand through his arm, and gently supported her forward.

"You must let me sustain you a little—you see you can't very well help yourself," said he, soothingly—and his voice was sweet when he chose. "Come, now, bear up! It is less than a mile to the rise whence you can sight the farmhouse, and where I shall rid you of my hateful presence. Do try and fight off the unpleasant feeling!"

She presently succeeded in doing so, and even in walking on without his assistance.

"I am better now, thank you, sir," she said, disengaging her arm, though with nothing of her previous shrinking. "And," after a pause, and with renewed composure, "you are wrong in speaking of your presence as hateful to me."

"You are kind to say so," incredulously.

"Indeed, indeed, I mean it!" she continued, earnestly. "I am sure there is much innate nobility and goodness in you, which no amount of vicious associations can have altogether extirpated."

"Thank you, miss."

He said this gravely, and neither of them spoke again till the rise in the road was reached where they were to separate.

"Do you intend to keep your oath of secrecy?" he here demanded, with startling abruptness.

She hesitated, without replying.

"I see!" said he, with a contemptuous laugh.

"They were right, and I was a soft fool."

"Do you regret having interposed between my would-have-been murderers and me, sir?"

"No, I don't! I think I would have saved you under any circumstances. But that isn't here nor there. Break your oath when you choose! Of what consequence is the stretching of a neck or two?"

"You wrong me, Mr. Harper, I have had no intention of making a revelation of what I have witnessed to the authorities (notwithstanding my enforced oath) *immediately*. I should at least have waited several days, in order to give you all the chance to quit the country, which, at least in the case of your late confederates, I think altogether undeserved."

"Thanks! Perhaps it will serve my turn, too. In less than twelve hours I shall be far out at sea."

A new thought seemed to strike her.

"Wait!" said she. "It is in your power to make me change my intention, and preserve that bloody secret inviolate to the end of my days."

He regarded her in surprise.

"That would be far better," said he. "But, how does it lie in me?"

She went on with trembling earnestness and eloquence.

"Oh, sir! I would save you from the world, from wickedness, from yourself. I would call you back to truth, honor, usefulness, religion! You have impressed me strangely, profoundly—I do not deny it. There is good in you yet—good that may be stimulated into fresh life, and redeem the past. Do not interrupt me. And, as you may have had a mother or a sister once dear and precious to you, do not, I beseech you, scorn what I am about to propose!"

The young man was powerfully agitated. He stood suspensefully silent and erect in the moonlight, his eyes glowing through the half-mask that he had not once removed, his broad chest laboring underneath his folded arms.

"Speak!" he said, huskily.

"I propose this: Swear to me, by all memories that you still hold sacred, to struggle henceforth, incessantly, perseveringly, toward a better and truer life—and never, *never*, to associate with criminals or wrong-doers again! Do this, and I on my part shall promise you sacredly to keep my compulsory oath of this evening, with God's help, inviolate to the end of my days."

Harper's agitation continued.

"What words are these to move me thus powerfully?" he murmured, more to himself than otherwise. "Words that seem to reach out of my bygone innocence, and into my very soul?"

Then he impulsively seized Edna's hand, which he raised impressively to his lips, while lifting his right hand to the starry heavens.

"It is a compact!" he exclaimed. "I accept, and will, with God's help, keep the oath you require of me!"

"And mine shall likewise be kept!" cried the young woman, exaltedly. "It is, as you say, a compact."

"Farewell! We shall doubtless never meet again, you and I."

"But, none the less do I command you to God, sir. Farewell, and be strong! But wait; should I not see your face before we go our doubtlessly eternally separate ways?"

The young man hesitated.

"I have not presumed to ask your name?" he said.

"My name is Edna."

"A pretty name! But Edna—what?"

"Gray."

"Gray, Gray! You are boarding with your family at the Webbs?"

"With my father only—that is my sole family."

"Excuse me, Miss Gray—and your father is—"

"Mr. Stephen Gray, a retired police detective."

Her companion started back with a half-uttered imprecation.

"Thunder and lightning!" he exclaimed; "not Springsteel Steve, as he used to be called?"

She gave an astonished affirmative.

"Good-by, Miss Gray! It is perhaps well I did not remove my mask." And the young man walked rapidly back over the road they had just covered.

CHAPTER IV.

A DETECTIVE'S INQUISITION.

EDNA watched her late companion's retreating figure till it was gradually lost amid the shadowing trees, and then hurried on to the farm-house.

Before she reached it, however, there was a recurrence of her former terror—the vivid mental picture of the ghastly scene in Bleak Hollow—and she was once more at the mercy of her horrified impressions.

She managed to make her way, however, to the farm-house piazza, on which not only Mr. Gray, but several of the household were anxiously awaiting news from the men who had long since been dispatched in search of her, in various directions.

Then came the revulsion, and Edna was sobbing hysterically in her father's arms.

"Whatever can have happened?" demanded fat old Mrs. Webb, the good farm-wife. "The idee of any one bein' lost hereabouts in old Purchase!"

"Not sech a wild idee, after all, mother," said old Mr. Webb, equally jovial, but as spare as a bean-pole. "City gals ain't country gals, we must remember."

Edna had by this time, with kindly Miss Libby Webb's assistance, partly regained her composure, and was trying to explain how she had lost her way, and had been set aright by a gentlemanly young man who declined to give his name, when she again broke down.

"You are simply nervous and distressed," said Mr. Gray, quietly, but with certain thoughts of his own. "Something to eat, my dear, and then to bed at once. That is what will build you up."

Edna was accordingly glad enough to be sent off to bed under plump and good-natured Miss Libby's care, and apparently without any one having suspected the real significance of her detention.

Indeed, Miss Libby was so good-natured as to help Edna undress, and declare that she would not quit the bedside until the latter was lost in the refreshing sleep that she so much needed, for which Edna, in her then nervous state, was becomingly grateful.

But after she had been comfortably installed for the night, and while her companion was chatting to her in an easy-going somnolent way of hers, Miss Libby began to examine, with a country-girl's natural curiosity, and perhaps a little envy, the prettily-fitting city-made gown the young guest had been wearing.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Miss Libby, inspecting the waist; "how I wish I could get into such a dress!"

Edna, who was now quite recomposed, could not forbear smiling, for the speaker, though a comely young woman, was extremely large and fleshy.

"They don't or can't make a waist like this around here," continued Miss Libby, discontentedly. "Even in White Plains there ain't a single dressmaker could do it so trimly."

"You shall have an introduction to my dressmaker, then," said Edna, sleepily, "when you visit me in New York next autumn, as you have promised."

"Oh, thank you, miss! I shall be ever so glad." And, with another admiring sigh, the inspection passed from waist to skirt. "Why, even the skirt has a style and fall about it that one don't get from round-about here!"

"What, that simple thing?" And Edna's eyes were fast closing.

But Miss Libby's next words effectually brought them wide open again.

"I declare to goodness!" she exclaimed. "Where could you have been with this dress, Miss Gray?"

"Where?" and poor Edna was wide enough awake now. "Why, nowhere in particular, Miss Libby! Why do you ask?"

"There's leaves and some little mud stuck fast away up over the hem, just as if you'd knelt on one knee in some moist place."

"Oh, I might have done so in looking for wild flowers, you know."

"But, what's this? I declare to goodness! it looks like blood-specks!"

Edna was now sitting up in bed, with the pallor of a ghost.

"Blood-specks? Impossible!" she faltered.

"But, here they are—look for yourself!" and Miss Libby brought the skirt nearer. "Oh, la! but I oughtn't to have startled you so! you're whiter than the pillars themselves."

Edna drew back with a shudder.

"It is nothing, though you did startle me not a little," she murmured. "How could such stains have come on my skirt?"

"Don't let it trouble you, dear," continued Miss Libby, lightly. "You might have stopped near where they'd been killing some chickens, you know."

"Very likely! But, do take the skirt away, and put it in the wash." And Edna, with a fresh brain-picture of the hollow-scene slowly dragging itself like a panorama through her tortured mind, sunk back in bed. "Take it away—out of the room, please!"

"Why, yes, miss, right off!" And Miss Libby stepped out with the skirt in her hand.

But, brief as was her absence, when she returned, Edna Gray was tossing wildly, with a wild, hunted look in her eyes and a flush in her cheeks, in the initial stages of a brain fever.

Her father was called, and a physician hastily summoned.

Fortunately the attack was not a severe one, though three days elapsed before good treatment, but most of all a powerfully robust constitution, pulled the sufferer through.

It was all of a week, however, before Edna regained her natural health, strength and spirits sufficiently to be able to look back upon her experience of that eventful night resolutely and without shuddering, if not exactly with total equanimity.

However, she knew that her father had been observing her intently, and she was not wholly unprepared for the interview that was now at hand.

She was sitting with a book in a beautiful grove back of the farm-house, when she saw Mr. Gray approaching one morning, with a peculiar, but not unkindly, look in his steel-gray eyes that she knew invariably meant "business."

Mr. Gray seated himself at his daughter's side, and, after some agreeable interchanges, said:

"You have probably divined, my dear, that I intend seeking an explanation of you?"

"Yes, papa," and she cast down her eyes, "I have felt that it was coming."

"You are not—you have never been afraid of me, Edna?"

"Never, father. Let it come now, since it must."

"What was the real cause of your detention on that night, my dear?"

"First, let me ask, papa, if anything was revealed by me in my delirium?"

"Literally, nothing, beyond the conveyance of an impression (only to me, however) that you were burdened with some dreadful secret."

"I can continue to carry it," said Edna, in a low voice. "Besides, it is less burdensome now."

"Miss Libby," her father went on, "had also told me about the stains upon your dress-skirt, though she had attached no special significance to them in her own mind."

"I am listening, papa."

"You became possessed of your secret on that evening?"

"Yes, papa."

"I divine that you were the unwilling witness of something terrible?"

"More than terrible—horrible!"

"Was it connected with crime?"

"Yes."

"Then, my dear child, it is not proper that you should continue, as you propose, to carry your secret alone."

Edna bent her eyes yet lower, but made no answer.

"You must share it with me, my dear."

"Father, I cannot."

"Ah! an oath to secrecy?"

"Yes—a terrible oath and a compact."

"A compulsory one, though?"

"Yes—in the first place."

Mr. Gray's steel-gray eyes glistened with intelligent shrewdness.

"Ah, let me see. An oath, first enforced under extreme threats, or personal danger, eh?"

"Yes."

"And afterward renewed of your own volition?"

"Yes."

"Very extraordinary! My dear, my whole past career, as you know, has been an unrelenting, conscientious opposition to and hunting down of crime."

"But you are now on the retired list, father."

"That makes no difference. I would be treacherous to my traditions, Edna, if I should not still manifest an interest in ferreting out and exposing to justice such grave crime as chances in my way."

"But this hasn't chanced in your way, father."

He took her hand, and made her look into his eyes, which she did with a steadiness worthy of her siring.

"It will not do, my dear," said Mr. Gray, gravely. "You must share your secret with me."

"Father, I cannot."

"I must insist!"

"You would not have me forswear myself, father?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, no—that is, of course not—not under any circumstances! But a forced oath—"

"It was given, or taken, a second time, and willingly, even eagerly, father."

"I begin to comprehend. By the way, can you remember the exact terms of the oath?"

"To the letter."

"Repeat them to me."

Edna obeyed.

"Ah!" Mr. Gray went on; "you swore to never *consciously* reveal what you had discovered?"

"Yes."

"Both odd and fortunate, that! What were they thinking of, that the word *consciously* should have crept in?"

"I don't know."

"And this saving adverb also interposed with its qualification in your subsequent repetition of the oath."

"Yes."

Springsteel Steve.

"Good, my dear!" You shall not be forsown, and yet I shall share your secret."

"I understand," and Edna gave a start. "Oh, father! you would not take advantage—"

"Yes, I would and shall, my child!"

He had already made a pass over her forehead and eyes that was having its effect.

A few passes more, and Edna Gray was in the mesmeric trance!

CHAPTER V.

PURLOINING A SECRET.

EDNA was leaning back easily in the rustic seat, her face upturned, with the eyelids peacefully closed as if in sleep, and yet with a strange aspect of suspended and even expectant animation over her lineaments.

Her mesmerizing parent studied her eloquent face for some moments in some anxiety, and then, with a final pass over the closed eyelids, that brought something like the ghost of a flutter into the girl's living unconsciousness, as it might be called, said:

"Edna, my child, are you with me?"

The lips moved with a hushed, but clearly enunciated, "Yes."

"You are sure it is with me, your own father, that you are, and not with any one else?"

"I am with you, my dear father; but you are unfamiliar with this old private drive-way that I am threading in such nervous haste."

"A driveway? Describe it."

"It opens in grandly from the unfrequented public road."

"Why should a public road be unfrequented?"

"I don't know. It might have been an old public road that had given way to a new one, and grown deserted in consequence."

"Well, the driveway?"

"It is broad and thickly bordered with tall evergreens—spruces, hemlocks, pines and cedars, I think; for it is quite nightfall now, and the moon is not up."

"An entrance, doubtless, to some fine estate?"

"Yes; but woefully neglected. Fences down, road-wall crumbling, the avenue itself overgrown with grass and weeds. Everything in neglect and decay."

"Well, go on to the house."

"I can't; I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know—of the going-to-happen! Wheels and hoof-beats from where the house ought to be? Yes; a team coming down the avenue. Oh! I must not be discovered here. Come, let us fly!"

"Well, you are in full flight—back to the public road, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes!" breathlessly; "but there is no time. I shall be overtaken. Quick, here is an opening to the right. Into it at last, and safe—safe! But no; the team has also stopped at the path-steps are following me. Heavens! if they should have despaired my trespassing, and now be in pursuit? On, on, on! Strange footfalls, those behind! Some shuffling and slow, as if under a burden, the others brisk and impatient. Heaven grant that I am not overtaken! Here in this deep, broad space at the bottom of the hollow the path crosses a brook. But I am concealed. I crouch behind some skirting bushes. I am safe at least for the present."

There was a pause, in which the panting breathlessness of the subject had a rest, while the faint, far-away but excited voice died off with a sort of sigh.

"You say this deep, broad hollow has a name?" queried the mesmerizer.

"I haven't said so yet, but it has a name," came the response. "It is called Bleak Hollow."

"So! Well, here come the owners of the pursuing footsteps, I suppose."

"Yes; here they come. The moon is up now, and I can see quite distinctly."

"Who are they?"

"Four men—all masked—two of superior appearance, who come first; two commoner-looking, who follow with a burden—a long bundle, wrapped closely in a dark-colored rug. I am terribly afraid!"

"Still afraid! what for?"

"Something tells me the burden they carry is a corpse."

"Well, what is happening?"

"They have set the burden down under a tree—only the half of a tree that looks as if it had been struck by lightning—and now they, the two of them, are digging. Ah!" with a shudder; "the leader—the thick-set, elderly-looking man of the two others—has marked off the trench. It must be a grave!"

"Go on! go on! What more?"

"The two others have drawn apart to near my hiding-place. The leader is quick, imperative and decided. His companion is much younger, and appears both sullen and timid. They begin to converse, and address each other by name."

"The names! what are they?"

"The younger is occasionally addressed as

Harper—Frank Harper; the other by a name that seems not wholly unfamiliar to me. It is O'Meara."

"O'Meara! But go on! What is the gist of their talk?"

"Wait!" and the subject seemed to be listening intently. "Oh, it is dreadful! A miser has been murdered, and this is the secret burial of the remains?"

She went on to describe the dream-picture in every one of its frightful details.

Again, in her tell-tale trance, the burden fell from the hands of its carriers, the rug was unrolled, the ghastly blood-dabbled features of its lifeless inmate were disclosed, and she was starting up out of her concealment with the horrified exclamation that had betrayed her to the guilty men. Once more, for the mesmerizer's enlightenment, did she pass through those dreadful moments of captivity, with her life trembling in the balance; the subsequent rescue and protection at Harper's hands; the taking of the terrible oath, and all, not ceasing in the dramatic revelation until her final parting with Harper was reached, together with the solemn compact, or exchange of oaths, upon the moon-lighted road, and her companion's hasty flight after learning of her father's identity, and refusing to take off his mask.

The revelation was complete.

"Mr. Gray drew a long breath, made some counter-passes with his extended hands, fluttered his handkerchief in the subject's face, and she started out of her trance.

"Oh, father!" was Edna's first exclamation in her restored condition; "how could you?"

"How could I not? You might better ask, my dear child," was the composed reply. "But, be easy. You are not forsown; nothing has been *consciously* betrayed."

She slowly regained her own composure, and seemed to accept the situation as inevitable.

"I might have known that you would have learned all, sooner or later," she sighed.

"I should have refrained, as I have always done, from prying into your strictly personal affairs, Edna."

"I know that, father. I am not offended—not now, at least, when there is no longer any help for it. How much did I reveal?"

"All!"

"Are you sure?"

"Quite so."

And he speedily illustrated, to the satisfaction of both, that every feature of the affair had been faithfully reproduced, to the minutest detail.

"What shall you do, father?" inquired Edna, after a long pause.

Before Mr. Gray could reply, comely but elephantine Miss Libby Webb put in an appearance from suspiciously near at hand, and wished to know whether apple-pie or rice-pudding would best meet with the city boarders' approbation for a dessert to the dinner that was then under way in the kitchen.

"Did you notice how flushed and flurried Miss Libby looked?" asked Edna, when the important question and its propounder had been disposed of.

"She's always flushed and flurried, more or less," was the absent reply, and then Mr. Gray laughed, as he added: "Your dear mother was a very stout woman, Edna; but she would have been a mere shadow alongside of the Webb girl."

"Still, it struck me just now."

"I know what you would say, my love," with a comprehensive glance around, "but your anxiety is premature. There is not a nook in our proximity sufficiently capacious for our mountainous beauty to have played the eavesdropper in."

Edna was reassured.

"What shall you do?" she asked again.

"I am reflecting, my dear. A week has elapsed, and doubtless all the guilty parties are far beyond reach. O'Meara must be well on his way to Belgium by this time; Harper far on his trip to Uruguay; Timmins, the seafarer, off on the blue water beyond even guess-work; while Swart, the elder of the grave-diggers—let me see: Swart's intention was not declared, I believe?"

"No further than that he was to go West."

"Ah! a little less vague than to go to sea, but not much. Well, our knowledge of the names of the criminals is something to start on."

"Except in the case of O'Meara, might they not have been assumed for the occasion, as an extra-precaution?"

"Yes; a good idea that, my dear. And O'Meara's name is doubtless likewise an alias, though I have never known him save by that and Red Larry. Let me see."

And the old detective fell into a bit of hard thinking.

CHAPTER VI.

PIECING THINGS TOGETHER.

"WELL, the primary step," said Mr. Gray, "is to find out who has been murdered."

Edna started.

"That aged dead face has been haunting me for so long!" she murmured. "Have you made

any inquiries as to any one having mysteriously disappeared, father?"

"How could I, as yet, when only just enlightened as to the nature of your unhappy secret?"

"True; I had forgotten."

"However, inquiries shall be cautiously set on foot without delay. Leave that to me. Bleak Hollow! that is the only name we have as yet connected with the locality."

"That is all."

"Still you would be able to identify the drive-way, and so on, again, if taken there?"

"Yes, but—" she paused, beginning to pale and tremble.

"Compose yourself, Edna. Under no circumstances shall you be asked to revisit the fatal spot, unless with your freest will, and when you would have your nerves more thoroughly restored than now."

"Thank you, my dear father. You are always considerate and kind. But I hardly think I could ever be induced to tread that dreadful footpath again, even in broad day and with you at my side, unless—unless—"

She hesitated in no little confusion, for the kindly though penetrating steel-gray eyes were studying her searchingly.

"Unless what, my child?"

Instead of answering at once, Edna laughed nervously.

"I don't wonder, papa, at their having called you Springsteel Steve," she observed, "for all that you have mostly been so reticent about your detective career."

"Why, my dear?"

"Your eyes can take on the glint of steel, so readily, and I am sure," with a prideful glance over the veteran's powerful, spare frame, with its erect military carriage, "in spite of your—your uncertain age, you might still spring at a ruffian's throat like a tiger upon its prey, should occasion demand it."

Mr. Stephen Gray, surnamed Springsteel Steve, smiled indulgently on his beloved and only child.

"Thank you, my daughter. Since your dear mother's death—longer ago than you can remember, God rest her!—you are the only one to flatter and say pretty things to me, and I must confess that I like the coddling— But, to return to our sheep, my dear, as the Italians say after an unwarranted digression. Unless—"

Edna colored.

"You see it is no use trying to mislead your old father," he went on, with his shrewd smile.

She laughed again.

"I will finish what I was going to say, then," she declared. "I think I could hardly be induced to revisit that terrible spot, father, unless it should hold out some hope of clearing Mr. Harper from an actual participation in the crime."

Her father looked grave, but almost instantly burst into a hearty laugh that was sufficiently suggestive.

"It isn't anything of the sort!" exclaimed Edna, half-angrily, amid her blushes. "You sha'n't go on with such talk."

"I? I haven't said a word."

"Still, hints and innuendoes are just as hateful and unjust as—as downright roaring sarcasm!"

"But, my dear, absurd little girl, I didn't open my lips."

"Yes, you did—to laugh."

"Oh, oh! the expressiveness of my laughter must be beyond price."

Here the dinner-bell interrupted them, and they obeyed its summons.

"What a picturesque spot, Farmer Webb," Mr. Gray remarked during the repast, "is that deep, dark, wooded hollow that I have noticed just south of your farm, on the lower road."

"Yes, sir, responded the farmer, with his customary satisfaction when any natural feature of the neighborhood was praised. "It's generally allowed to be picurskew, i.e. Oak Holler, an' when I was a half-grown boy it was fuller of snakes than a Christmas puddin' is of raisins, though the hogs have done cleaned 'em out long sence."

"Oak Hollow, eh? Are there many more such picturesque places in the vicinity?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Gray. There's Deep Holler, Red Holler, Flack Holler, Jones's Holler, Barnes's Holler, an'—an' yes, there's Bleak Holler, too, but that's nigh on to four miles off, 'way up t'other side St. Mary's Lake."

"Bleak Hollow, eh? Seems to me I've heard that name connected with some large estate or other."

"Like enough, sir, if you've heerd of old Miser Willard, of the Willard Manse, an' I've yet to see the man 'long hereabouts what hain't heerd of him."

He said this with a sort of contemptuous snort, that was heartily echoed by both the fat Mrs. Webb and the very fat Miss Libby.

"Miser Willard, of Willard Manse, eh?" continued the old detective, genially. "But you must remember I am a comparative stranger, who can't be expected to have heard of even him."

"You hain't lost nothin', sir," said the farmer. "He's the meanest skunk out of jail!"

"But who is he—what else, I mean—and why do they say Willard Manse, instead of Willard Mansion, farmer?"

"It was all along of the miser's father bein' a poetic jackass, an' thinkin' as how *manse* sounded the purtier, I suppose," replied Mr. Webb, answering the last question first. "An' as for Miser Willard himself, he's jest an' only the mean, dirty, flint-skinnin' avaricious dog what his name indicates. He druv his own an' only son, Martin, away from his door, years ago, to starve, simply for marryin' a nice gal without any money, an' she an' their infant boy a-starvin', too. Oh, but he's the champion mean hog, Mr. Gray!"

"Not a very enviable character, truly."

"Envious! Why, he'd skin a katydid for its hide, hair and tallow! It's a wonder he hasn't been murdered for his money long before this, too."

"Ah, indeed?"

"Yes; he lives all alone in the big old house, and never banks a cent—that is, when he isn't off on one of his periodical treasure-hunts, as I understand he is at present."

"A treasure-seeker, too?"

The farmer grinned.

"Jess so, sir; an' what treasure is it you think he wants to find?"

"Give it up."

"Captain Kidd, the pirate's!"

And the farmer and his family guffawed disdainfully, while Mr. Gray did not pursue the subject further just then.

A couple of hours later Mr. Gray drove around to the shady east piazza with Farmer Gray's best mare and Sunday buggy, which he was occasionally in the habit of hiring for an afternoon's jaunt.

"Come, Edna!" he called out to his daughter, who was chatting with Miss Libby behind the trellis-vines; "you must take a drive with me. It will do you good."

She came running out to the horse-block with an anxious look.

"Papa, you surely don't mean—"

"Nothing of the sort, my love. We're to visit an old friend of mine in White Plains. Get your hat!"

The girl willingly obeyed.

"You frightened me, papa," said she, as they drove off. "I feared you were going to seek for the—the Bleak Hollow place."

"Time enough for that, my dear, and easily found when sought. No, Edna, you shall have due warning of my desire for your company thither, and it shall be solely of your free will."

"You are very kind, father. And whom are we going to see now?"

"A very old friend of mine, the Sheriff of Westchester county."

"Oh!"

"Yes; I have sounded the Webbs yet further about the—affair, and have obtained pretty much all they know."

"You managed it shrewdly with the farmer at dinner. What more have you discovered?"

"First, as to the treasure-hunting craze of the recluse of Willard Manse—the recluse that was, we shall say."

"Well?"

"He seems to have been a good deal of a crank. Once or twice a year he would go on a journey, none knew exactly whither, though he is generally credited with being a long way off delving secretly for the mythical pirate's buried hoard—perhaps along the Hudson River shore, on the beach at Fire Island, Barnegat, or in some similarly lonely spot."

Edna repressed a little shiver.

"Ah, those murderers!" she murmured; "they selected their victim well."

"And their opportunity, too, my dear. They were wickedly wise in their generation. The miser was supposed to be off on one of his crazy pursuits, was not known to have returned to the manse at all, and, naturally, his death would not be suspected for weeks, perhaps months. He had come back in secret, though, and only to meet his doom at the assassins' hands. Oh, but that Red O'Meara is a deep one, my dear."

"What about his companions?"

"Of Harper I can learn nothing as yet. But of the two others there is some sort of clew to their identity."

"Ah! Swart and Timmins?"

"Yes."

"Are the Webbs familiar with any such names belonging hereabouts?"

"Never heard of 'em."

"What then can you have discovered of them?"

The old detective chuckled as he urged the mare's pace over the hilly road.

"This much, my child," he replied: "That Swart might very well be an assumed name for one Black; while Timmins, not in itself a common name, might equally be a change rung upon the much commoner *Simmons*."

CHAPTER VII.

SHERIFF AND SPRINGSTEEL.

"How very clever you are, papa!" was Edna's admiring comment.

"Don't mention it, my daughter!"

"Well, as to Black and Simmons?"

"Those names are, fortunately, not unfamiliar. Farmer Webb knows a Lewis Blackwell—a small farmer and a near neighbor of Miser Willard's."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and, moreover, Lewis Black is known to have hated Willard, who had defeated him in a suit at law, to his partial impoverishment, several years ago."

"What has become of Swart-Black now?"

"Farmer Webb had occasion to visit the man's house on business several days ago. A stranger was in possession. Black had finally disposed of his place at a noticeably low price on the day preceding the evening of your adventure, and had not since been seen. Disappeared, my dear. Supposed to have 'gone West.'"

"This is very astonishing."

"Very."

"Did Black have a family?"

"No: a widower, without children; but he did have a ne'er-do-well nephew, known to have been a recent visitor, and now likewise *non est*."

"And the nephew?"

"A sailor named *Simmons*—Joe Simmons."

Edna drew a long breath.

"I shouldn't have dreamed of your discovering so much, and so soon," she said.

"Chance, my dear, chance—ever the detective's erratic friend in need!"

"Shall you go on with the case—independently, father?"

"That remains to be seen. Even if no longer in the harness, I consider it my bounden duty to detect and expose such crime as comes in my way—without mentioning that there may be good money in this thing." And the veteran's long, flexible Scotch upper lip took on a virtuously canny expression. "But I have decided to first consult with Langley."

"Is that the sheriff's name?"

"Yes; a discreet and long-headed man, my dear, besides being an old side-partner of mine. Moreover, he can, besides being secret, bring to bear his official authority, you see, which is the very best of backing in any sort of investigation."

Mr. Sheriff Langley was found at his office in the Court House.

He was a taciturn, modest-looking man, suggestive but little of the typical country politician, who received his old friend with unobtrusive warmth, while seeming highly favored at making Miss Gray's acquaintance.

The sheriff had plenty of time at his disposal, and, after the trio had been made comfortable in his private office, was soon placed in possession of the facts in connection with Edna's adventure.

"What do you think of it, Jake?" demanded Mr. Gray, slapping his old friend on the knee, when all had been told.

"It will do, Steve, it will do!" was the quiet rejoinder.

"You're not particularly enthusiastic, it seems."

"I never am."

"True, I ought to have remembered that. Well, shall we work it up together?"

"With all my heart."

"But what do you think of it?"

"A most extraordinary case, Springsteel!—I let myself out to that extent, you see. In fact, judging by its present aspect, it may very well prove the *cause celebre* of Westchester county."

"Aha! I knew you would catch on, my old friend. Mum's the word, at least for the present, eh?"

"Yes; secrecy is always best."

"What do you know of the Swart-Black and Timmons-Simmons men?"

"Everything you have told me, and more, too."

"Would you have thought them capable of murdering the miser?"

"Yes; Black through revenge, and Simmons, through general cussedness. Then there was the cupidity, as the master-motive, of course."

"You remember O'Meara, when you were on the force with me?"

"Quite well; a dangerous man and a cool card. We've got him dead, should he ever venture within our clutches."

"True; nothing doubtful in his case. Can you place the man, Frank Harper?"

"No; he is a mystery. However, from Miss Gray's statement, I shouldn't wonder if he had been forced into the affair—perhaps was wholly innocent, save as in after-knowledge and participation, of course."

Edna's heart was secretly grateful to the sheriff for these words.

"Had you the means of judging what might have been the young man's age, Miss Gray?" Langley asked, after a reflective pause.

"Only indistinctly, by reason of his mask," was the reply. "Twenty-three or twenty-four, was my impression."

"Strange!"

"What is strange?" demanded Gray.

"A certain coincidence, which, however, can amount to little."

"But what is it?"

"Why, Edgar Willard would be of about that same age, if alive."

"Who was he?"

"Miser John Willard's grandson, who, as an infant in his disowned father's arms, was driven away from Willard Manse to starve, twenty years ago."

"Oho! Farmer Webb mentioned that. What became of the outcasts?"

"Swallowed up in Swarming New York long ago, and doubtless dead long ago. Martin's wife had died before the last appeal to the old man was made, and he would have had a tough time earning his own subsistence, while the child was sickly and but half-nourished."

"The Harper young man must remain a mystery then, at least for the time being."

"We've enough to go on at present."

"True. Well, our first step?"

"Is to prove the murder."

"Certainly. Where a murder is charged, the corpse is generally first produced."

"Of course."

"But I saw the murdered man buried!" exclaimed Edna, striving to appear calm.

"It will be necessary to verify your testimony, Miss Gray," said Langley. "Not that your word is to be doubted by us for a moment, but, as a formality of law, the remains would necessarily have to be produced."

"But why?"

"For the coroner's investigation, and to make it clear that John Willard has really been murdered."

"But didn't I see the corpse?"

"You doubtless saw a corpse."

"Oh, I understand! How ridiculous I am!"

"By no means."

"Will you let me ask a question, sir?"

"By all means!"

"In case I had known and recognized the remains, at the secret interment, as those of Mr. Willard, of Willard Manse, would not my unsupported testimony be accepted, without such verification as you propose—that is, by exhumation?"

"Certainly not."

"Why, please?"

"Your story, Miss Gray—your adventure, as circumstantially related by you—is a most extraordinary one."

"An improbable one, you mean?"

The sheriff bowed, without replying.

"Oh, this is all right!" said Gray. "The body must be disinterred for the coroner's investigation, as a matter of course. Without that, no one would believe the miser dead at all, but only off on one of his cranky treasure-hunts."

"And me a systematic liar," supplemented Edna. "Thank you, papa."

"Don't be a little lunatic, my dear!"

"Asylums are handy, I suppose."

But it was not long before the men succeeded in mollifying the little lady's offended dignity.

In fact, not only was Edna's composure thoroughly restored, but, through the discussion under way, she was glad at finding herself able to look back upon her tragic adventure with much less of the shuddering horror than its merest recollection had theretofore inspired her with.

Indeed, much to her father's surprise, she even consented, with comparative readiness, to accompany them on the search for the miser's remains in Bleak Hollow, which it was finally determined to undertake on the following day.

"I scarcely dared expect it of you, my dear," said Mr. Gray, when they were on their way home. "You're a little trump!"

"Thank you," replied the girl. "Now since I have made tie resolution, I only hope I shall have the nerve to carry it out."

"Oh, you'll be all right! You've lot's of natural grit, and where there's a will there's a way."

But she allowed him to remain in ignorance of one thing.

And that was that, but for Sheriff Langley's charitable words regarding Harper's possible non-complicity in the crime, she would hardly have attempted to screw her resolution up to the sticking point, at all.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MORNING DRIVE.

SOON after breakfast at the farm-house on the following morning, Sheriff Langley drove up with a spanking brace of bays attached to a roomy spring-wagon, in the rear seat of which were two of his deputies.

Edna and her father were soon on board, and then away they dashed up the road, to the no small curiosity of Miss Libby Webb, who, if the truth must be told, was an old flame of the sheriff's; though whether or not he had been frightened from her shrine by the alarming rapidity of her avoirdupois increase it is not in our province to say.

"Ma, where *kin* they be going?" exclaimed Miss Libby.

"How should I know?" was the response. "If you couldn't worm that much out of Miss Edna, where's your boasted intellect, Elizabeth Julia Ann Webb? That's what I wanter know."

"Oh, n.y intellect is all right!" pouted the plethoric beauty. "An' as for wormin' anything out of Miss Edna, she's closer shet than a fly-trap in frost-time ever sence she can.e to hum

lookin' like a draggled-out ghost that night a week ago."

"I wonder where she had been an' what she had seen that evenin'," pondered the farm-wife, tucking her dusting-cloth under her arm, and wiping her spectacles with a corner of her calico apron. "It allers struck me as the gal might hev kept suthin' back."

"Mebbe she didn't keep it back from everybody," volunteered Miss Libby, with a mysterious air.

"What! do you know anything?"

"Never mind, ma. There's more strange things in this world as is known on in your philosophies."

"Oh, is there, indeed! How big we're a-growin' in our smartness, no less than in our stomachs an' chops, Elizabeth Ann Webb—not to mention nat'r'l bustle-supports!"

"Ma!"

"Oh, it's all right, Libby! I ain't no account, eff I am your mother. An' what difference should it make to me if Shurff Jake is takin' a shine to the detector's purty darter, an' she soft, sweet, purty an' slim enough to eat."

"MA! the idee?"

"Air you furgettin', Elizabeth Ann Webb, that there's two dead roosters to pick fur pot-pie, an' the milk-room not cleaned up yet?"

"No, I'm not!"

And Miss Libby lumberingly flounced away to her household duties, while her mother complacently got in some fresh work with her dusting-cloth.

Edna, at Sheriff Langley's request, had taken her seat at his side in the wagon, while her father had bestowed himself behind with the deputies, who had a couple of spades and a pick-ax at their feet.

"Let me congratulate you, Miss Gray," said Langley, in his quiet way, soon after they had started on. "You are looking fully equal to the task before you, which I can well understand to be a trying one for any refined young lady."

"Thank you, sir; I shall endeavor to do my duty," Edna replied. "But was it exactly necessary to bring these two men along?"

"I have considered it so! It is well that our investigation should be of a thoroughly formal nature, since the verification of your story must necessarily be made public."

Edna sighed.

"You won't like that, of course," he went on, kindly. "But it can't possibly be helped."

"If I could only have kept my own counsel!"

"That, of course, would have effectually obviated any publicity. In fact, Miss Gray, I wonder that you did not."

"You do not know my father."

"Oh, but I do indeed!" said the sheriff, with a laugh. "And come to think of it, now that I recall Springsteel Steve's penetration of old, I do not wonder that you were unable to keep your own counsel. But, apart from the pleasure of your companionship, Miss Gray, can you guess my chief object in requesting you to accept the seat at my side?"

Edna shook her head.

Langley took the lines in one hand, so as to take out of his pocket a small photograph of the cheap tin-type species, together with a hand magnifying glass.

"Let me request you to examine that picture," said he. "It is a poor one, but the glass will bring out the lineaments with wonderful distinctness."

She did as requested, and instantly started, turning pale.

The portrait was that of an old and rather repulsive old man, with disheveled white hair and beard.

"You recognize the face?"

"I do."

"As whose?"

"As that of the dead man, whose body and staring dead face came rolling out of the rug, as I have described—or rather as my father has described to you." And she bravely strove to keep her composure.

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. Save from the blood that was on the dead face, and the frozen horror in the staring eyes, the resemblance is absolute."

"I am glad of this recognition," said the sheriff, receiving back the articles and restoring them to his pocket. "That is a photograph of John Willard, the miser of Willard Manse, taken within six months—and probably the only one ever taken."

After a pause, during which Edna seemed to have thoroughly recovered her nerve, she asked:

"If the man was so miserly as they say, I can't understand why he would have even submitted to having such a trifling picture taken."

I can explain that, Miss Gray. A deputy of mine—one of the men now accompanying us—obtained that picture for me yesterday afternoon, after your story had been made known to me, of Miss Raw, Willard's housekeeper when not otherwise employed by reason of his long periodical absences. She may, like enough, be present at to-day's proceedings."

"Has she then been informed of the substance of my story?"

"Yes."

Edna sighed again. There would be plenty

enough of publicity now, she had no doubt; but, as the sheriff had said, there was no help for it.

"How had the woman obtained her master's picture?" she asked.

"According to her own statement, she had induced him to sit, at her expense, to a tramp photographer, who chanced along the road one day."

"She must have thought more highly of Mr. Willard than any of his neighbors."

"There was doubtless some sort of sympathy between them. She is, moreover, a half-sister, or something of the sort."

"Did she make no objection to giving up the picture?"

"None, upon realizing the importance of the affair."

"Nor make any comment?"

"I understand, not. The man who obtained it represents Miss Raw as a remarkably self-contained elderly person. She manifested much emotion, however, and, after recovering her composure in a measure, said that she would forthwith investigate the interior of the manse of which Mr. Willard had, after his custom, intrusted her with the keys, on his secret departure from home, several weeks prior to the night of your adventure."

Edna sought no further information. But how strangely complicated the affair was becoming. "If she had only been able to keep her own counsel, even apart from her father!" was what she now kept repeating to herself in an agony of regret.

On her own account, morbidly sensitive as she was by nature, she did not so greatly care for the publicity in which she would presently, beyond peradventure, be made to figure conspicuously.

It would be unpleasant, perhaps mortifying, but she was strong, she was buoyant in her youth and health, and she would manage to struggle through somehow under the ordeal, until the hateful fatality of that dread scene in the hollow should perhaps become, with healing time, but a dimly remembered phantasm of her past.

But was this all? No. Howsoever unwillingly, howsoever unconsciously and compulsorily, had she any the less broken her oath, her repeated oath, and broken faith as to solemn compact entered into with Frank Harper? Would he not, in his exile, read of her seemingly shameless treachery in the public prints? And might he not then forget, on his own part, his solemn oath to strive after the better and purer life, and once more rush, in sheer desperation, upon the downward path of the lost, the hopelessly wicked and the irreclaimable, while cursing her name as the very synonym of deceit, treachery and weakness?

This last reflection caused the young girl the most poignant of her mental sufferings. But, alas! as the sheriff had said, there would be no help for it.

It was a beautiful, cool, sunshiny morning, and Edna was surprised at recognizing so few of the features of the road, which, nevertheless, she could generally make out as the same over which she had taken the never-to-be-forgotten moonlight walk homeward with Frank Harper.

At last, however, as the team turned into the broad, neglected driveway entrance, it seemed to her that every inch of the way was familiar.

She knew that her father was observing her narrowly from behind, and she felt herself growing pale.

"Bear up, Edna!" said he, leaning forward in his kindest manner. "It will soon be over."

She nodded.

"There is the entrance to the footpath," she presently said, pointing to the opening in the evergreens. "Yes; that is it. But who is the tall, gaunt woman standing on guard there?"

"Don't be uneasy," said Langley. "It is only Miss Raw, who is mostly promptly on hand."

And then the team was drawn up abruptly at the entrance to the footpath.

CHAPTER IX.

MYSTERY.

As the party alighted from the spring-wagon, and one of the deputies made the team fast, Miss Raw, who looked like a grenadier, with a face of iron and eyes of stone, singled out Edna from the others, and hardly once took her grim gaze from her face from that time on.

"Air you the young woman," she asked, in a harsh, metallic voice, "what says as how my relative, John Willard, was killed, and saw him buried?"

Before Edna, in her surprise, could answer, Sheriff Langley interposed, after giving her a reassuring look.

"Time enough for such questions presently, Miss Raw," said he. "Come, let us be moving," and he led the procession down the path, adding: "Did you visit the manse, as my assistant said you purposed doing, Miss Raw?"

"Yes, I did," replied the grenadier, but still keeping her eyes riveted upon Edna, with whom she was keeping step, side by side, in the most aggravating way. "What if I did, shurff?"

"I would merely like to ask with what result,

Miss Raw?" continued the official, with added suavity.

"The strong box and the fire-proof has been skinned!" vehemently responded the woman, directing her words solely to the side of Miss Gray's head. "Skinned! them's the words. D'y'e hear me? Yes, you cat! skinned, bu'sted, cleaned out, scooped, stripped, peeled, gouged, robbed! That's the ticket!"

Under other surroundings, the woman's causelessly spiteful manner might have excited Edna's amusement; and, even as it was, she was not sorry to have her thoughts diverted, even thus disagreeably, from the painful associations that would otherwise have now come crowding upon her at every step.

She merely came to a halt until her father had relieved her of Miss Raw's extraordinary proximity, which he did by coolly ordering her onward with an imperative gesture, and then stepping into her place at his daughter's side.

"I don't care!" snapped out the grenadier, nearly twisting her head off in order still to keep her victim under fire. "No citified young gell on earth is a-goin' to trampie me underfoot, an' rub me round, headfu'st, in the mud, an' me not know it."

"It's a pity about you, Miss Raw-bones," said the old detective, genially. "But you will from this time forth cease directing your peculiar style of converse to this young lady, who happens to be my daughter. You hear me?"

Miss Raw was silenced at least for a time.

The party reached the bottom of the hollow, and crossed the brook, when there was a general pause, in which every one naturally turned to Edna.

"This is the place," said she.

She then went on to point out various spots that she recognized: the bushes behind which she had crouched in concealment; the spot under the blasted tree where the bundle in the rug had first been laid; the place where its contents had been accidentally revealed to her; and lastly where the grave had been dug.

This last was, especially, indicated with such quiet confidence that the sheriff's assistants began to dig at once under their chief's directions.

After the covering of brush and leaves had been removed from the surface, the lines of the grave, indeed, had been distinct enough to challenge any one's attention; and of course, as the digging proceeded, the looseness of the recently filled in earth was a further verification of the original trench.

But, as a grave, it no longer existed; it was found to be empty.

Of course, none was so astonished as Edna, who had braced herself as against the anticipated exhumation.

After it became evident that nothing was to be exhumed at that spot, the diggers looked up at the young lady with a peculiar expression, while Miss Raw burst into a sort of iron-clad laugh.

"He, he, he! Haw, haw, haw!" the woman laughed, insultingly. "Where's the gell now as says my half-brother, John Willard, is murdered, en' she see'd him berryed?"

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Miss Raw!" said Sheriff Langley, sharply. "No sensible person can doubt the young lady's word. That this earth is not now upturned for the first time, is evident. And look! what is that object at the bottom of the hole, Jim?"

"Looks like a piece of carpet," said the man, handing up the object for inspection, after a curious glance on his own account. "Or mebbe a piece of rug."

Edna pressed forward eagerly.

"It is a piece of the rug in which the body was wrapped!" she exclaimed.

"A piece of rug, or drugget, anyway," commented Langley, while his assistants now regarded the young lady with less incredulity. "Yes; and this makes the affair more explicable."

"To be sure it does!" supplemented Mr. Gray, with a relieved air. "The body has been secretly removed—probably by O'Meara and his two confederates directly subsequent to my daughter's departure in the young man Harper's company. Such mistrust on the part of the former would be readily consistent with Edna's story."

Langley and his assistants nodded their concurrence, and no heed was paid to a repetition of Miss Raw's metallic laugh.

But if the remains had been removed in accordance with this theory, it would also seem that they ought to be interred afresh, and not a great ways distant.

An exhaustive search of the entire hollow, however, failed to discover any signs of another interment.

Every one was, naturally enough, disappointed and nonplussed, apparently, with the single exception of Miss Raw, who was noisily exasperating, incredulous and cachinnatory at intervals.

"Look here, my good woman," said the sheriff at last, "perhaps you'd better give your amiable tongue a rest for your own good."

"What do you mean, shurff?"

"Well," with concealed humor, "it mightn't be exactly pleasant for you to be suspected of having removed the body yourself, you know."

"Me!" she screamed.

"Yes, you. Now don't fly off the handle, Miss Raw. I, for one, thoroughly believe Miss Gray to have told nothing but the truth; and she has, moreover, identified the face of the murdered man with that of Mr. Willard's picture, obtained from you yesterday."

"What of that?"

"Just this: that in my full opinion—and I think in the opinion of every one present, saving perhaps yourself—the body was buried in yonder grave just as the young lady has described. That it isn't now forthcoming, to verify her words *in toto*, is perhaps secretly more explainable to you, ma'm," with added grimness, though only assumed, "than the rest of us."

"To me?" the woman screamed again. "Why, Shurff Langley, I never even heered he was dead till yesterdays!"

"You say so."

"Good Lord!"

All the men were keeping a straight face with difficulty, though it was terrible earnestness for the spinster grenadier, who began to look scared.

"Now look here, Miss Raw," continued the sheriff, solemnly, "you confess the old man's money-chests to have been rifled."

"Yes. There!" tossing him a bunch of keys; "you kin s'arch the premises fur your own selves."

"Very good. But why, in your opinion, Miss Raw, may not the old man have been murdered, no less than robbed?"

"Because he wasn't to bum."

"How do you know that? And why may he not have returned secretly, as he had done before?"

"Because he couldn't an' didn't."

"This is prejudice, not argument. Look here; do you really believe this young lady to have concocted her entire story out of whole cloth?"

The answer was most unexpected.

"No, I don't," with a mollified but inscrutable look toward Edna. "I believe she saw just what she claims to have seen, but that it wasn't John Willard's corpse that she did see."

"This is surprising! Who else could have been murdered? What other corpse could have had a face so closely resembling John Willard's as to be mistaken for his portrait?"

"Find out!" And Miss Raw turned abruptly on her heel to march off.

"Hold on, Miss Raw. You can doubtless clear this thing up."

"I know I can, shurff; but I sha'n't."

"You surely don't mean to leave this mystery unexplained?"

"Yes, I do!" with the final maneuver of a masterly retreat, and colors flying.

And she did.

CHAPTER X.

FIVE YEARS LATER.

FIVE years had passed, when one day Edna Gray received the following letter from Miss Libby Webb:

"DEAR MISS EDNA,—Ain't you ever coming up to see us again? Here's another summer at hand, and yet neither you nor Mr. Gray make a sign. Ma can't understand it any more than I. Do you think I've forgotten the two win'er visits I paid you, and all the kindness you and Mr. Gray paid me? Oh, them theaters! Lord! Ma still won't believe the half I've told her. Think, now; it's five years since you went away. Both pa and ma say that if you don't let them and me pay back your hospitality they'll be mortally offended. Do let me know you're coming for the summer, dear. We've a young man boarder I know you'll take to; though it won't do you much good, dear Edna, since he's already taken to me. In fact, he's dead gone on me—such a love of a young man! And who do you think it is? Mr. Edgar Willard, grandson of the missing or murdered miser, no one can yet tell which."

"Everybody thought Mr. Edgar dead, but he's turned up from Brazil, and is going to come in for the manse at Bleak Holler, and all the rest of the property."

"When are you coming? Don't forget to let me know. People have clean forgot all about your published story in connection with that Bleak Holler mystery. Hurry up and come."

"Your affectionate,

"LIBBY WEBB."

"P. S. The roses is all in bloom, and I've got quite thinn."

L. W."

When her father came in a little later, Edna laughingly recited the contents of Libby's letter, especially the part alluding to the miser's grandson, which had excited her curiosity.

"Aren't you surprised to hear of this?" she asked.

"Yes, though I received fuller particulars from Sheriff Langley, whom I met on the street an hour ago," replied Mr. Gray. "By the way, Edna, I invited him to dinner, and I do hope you'll treat Langley nicely."

"Don't I always treat him well, father?"

"Not exactly, considering how much the poor fellow is in love with you."

"Indeed!" indifferently.

"Langley's a good man, and still a young and good-looking man, for all his being a widower!" cried the ex-detective. "I say, my dear, he's a good man and a young man!"

"Fiddlesticks, papa! do I question his excellence or his age?"

"He's got a fine property, too, besides, being in his third term as sheriff; and he loves you clean off his feet, my dear!"

"Dear papa, pray don't allude to this matter again. I have intimated distinctly to good Mr. Langley that I can never marry him, for the simple reason that I do not love him. He is, however, never any the less welcome as your guest and mine. Now are you going to be good, and tell me everything you know about this strangely-returned wandering miser's heir, Edgar Willard?"

"I don't know whether I am or not," grumbled Gray, plumping down in his favorite library easy-chair, and looking for his pipe. "Maybe you don't deserve it."

But she found and filled the pipe for him, striking a match with her own pretty hands—Edna was handsomer at twenty-five than she had been at twenty—and it was never long before the vision of her youth and loveliness brought smiles and content out of the surliest of the old fellow's humors.

"Well, my dear, there isn't a great deal to tell," said Mr. Gray, at last. "A month ago the missing young man put in an appearance at White Plains, from foreign parts, and quickly succeeded in establishing his identity."

"He is the grandson, and sole heir?"

"Yes; his parents died miserably when he was a child. A rich Brazilian adopted and carried him away."

"But it is still unknown whether John Willard is living or dead, since the body was never found."

"Langley thinks that the fact of his death will now be legally admitted, and the young man have no difficulty in establishing his claim."

"But was it not found that most of the miser's hoard had been made way with by the criminals?"

"Most of his private hoard—yes; but bless you, he left stacks of bonds and mortgages in the banks, besides the real estate, which, besides the Bleak Hollow place, Langley says comprises at least a dozen small tenant-farms, all valuable, not to mention an entire business block in White Plains. Old Willard's lawyers are honest men, who have been looking after the estate, and now a splendid lump has accumulated in rents and incomes. Langley is sure the estate can't be worth less than half a million."

"What a good thing for Miss Libby Webb!" observed Edna, with a smile.

Her father burst into a roar of laughter that it was good to hear.

"What! the frolicsome elephant cornering a matrimonial opportunity there?"

"But I've told you what she hints in her letter. Besides, she insists that she is now quite thin—thin with a double *n*, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Langley saw her a week ago, and swears she's a ton or two the heavier—a mountain of flesh—a waddling hogshead of rosiness and beauty!"

"Mr. Langley may be prejudiced. I did hear that he was at one time sweet upon Libby—who is a dear, pretty girl, if there is a good deal of her."

"Or she sweet on him—which?"

"Never mind, and I'm sure it can make no difference. The Webbs are still urging us to pay them a visit."

"Why shouldn't we?" said Mr. Gray, after thinking a moment. "I confess to a longing for the Westchester hills again, and the Webbs doubtless really want to pay you back for your hospitality to Libby here in the city."

"Yes; they seem to."

"Shall we go, my dear?"

"I don't know what to say, papa. I still have a sort of shrinking for the Bleak Hollow neighborhood."

"Nonsense! that thing has blown over—out of sight and mind, long ago."

"If I only thought that!"

"It is so, I tell you! It's understood, then; and we can be off at the end of the week. None too soon, either; for sweltering weather will be on us here before we are aware."

"Very well then, papa. But wait—about the returned heir!"

"What of him?"

"One thing seems inexplicable to me."

"Ah!"

"He lost his parents, and was taken away to Brazil when a mere child?"

"Yes."

"How, then, could he have learned of his grandfather's death, or of the disappearance which you say is now accepted as equivalent to his death?"

"That is the strangest part of it," replied Mr. Gray, suddenly growing serious. "According to the young man's account, he met a young man at the point of death somewhere down there in South America—I think it was in Buenos Ayres or Montevideo—and was told by him of what had been printed about the Bleak Hollow affair—your sworn account of your adventure, you know. That seems to have induced this young fellow to come up here and seek his rights in the estate."

"Montevideo!"

"Yes. But bless me! how pale you are,

Edna. Well, well; no wonder, perhaps, now that my own recollections are brightening up.

"What do you mean, father?" And Edna, who had grown very pale, composed herself with an effort.

"Why, Langley told me the name of the unfortunate young chap—dead now, I believe—that gave the wandering heir of Willard Manse his lucky cue."

"Was it Harper—Frank Harper?"

"Yes; doubtless the same who escorted you home from your adventure, after saving you from the other ruffians."

"But he was never a ruffian, I'm sure of it. So! dead at last, then, and in exile?" And the young woman sighed deeply.

"I reckon that's about the size of it, my dear, according to Langley."

"Father, you're so tired of the city, we might start for the Webbs' to-morrow, if you wish. I can pack up, and put things to rights here in the cottage by that time, and not half try."

"Good enough, my dear! But you're not often so ready and willing to get away from home."

But the old detective might have understood better, had he seen his daughter in tears, a little later, in the solitude of her own room.

If the sentiment was not exactly love that she had secretly entertained for the soft-voiced masked young stranger who had momentarily stepped into her life on that eventful night, it had, at all events, powerfully operated to the rejection of more than one ardent suitor for her hand and heart in the intervening years.

And now dead, gone out of her life forever, in the far, fair foreign land!

How, under what impression? With gentle remembrances of her, or cursing her memory, as synonymous of weakness, treachery and broken faith?

The returned heir, Edgar Willard, might be able to answer those questions.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS LIBBY.

"OH, Miss Edna! how sweet you are looking, and how glad I am to see you again!"

They were Miss Libby's greeting words, on the following day, as she folded their recipient in her mighty embrace, wherein a species of down-right suffocation was narrowly escaped.

Then she had breathlessly hurried the city guest up to the pleasant room that had been prepared for her in the pleasant old farm-house, with apparently no end to her welcoming chat as she assisted in unpacking and reviewing the new summer gowns that had been brought a-long for the country airing.

"In the first place, my dear!" cried Miss Libby, after one of her gasping intermissions, "don't you remark how thin I've grown an' am still a-growing!"

Edna with difficulty kept her countenance, for that poor Miss Libby was indeed a-growing was quite evident, though not in the direction of leanness, as she claimed, but just the reverse.

"It hadn't struck me at first, dear," was the polite reply, "perhaps from my being so glad to see you. But you are looking splendidly, Libby!"

"Nearly every one remarks it at first sight," said Libby, somewhat disappointed. "I can lace myself now to within a thirty-six waist-measure easily. Look again!" And she executed a sort of Brobdingnagian pirouette, to the sole revelation of the fact that she was laced, and to about the fullest capacity that even her immense proportions could safely stand without serious damage to the rib-structure.

"It's no difference how stout or how thin you may be, Libby," said Edna, and without exaggeration at that, "you'd still be a magnificent proportioned and beautiful woman. In fact, you always put me in mind of a captive queen of the Goths that I once saw in a great picture called 'The Triumph of Scipio Africanus.' Come, now, help me out with this trunk-tray, any you shall see a pretty new tea-gown I have brought you for a present."

The portly maiden clapped her hands for joy, and was speedily in raptures over the gift, which, however, she mincingly pretended to fear would be altogether too loose for her, though the donor's fears were just the opposite; and even this did not long deter her from returning to the haunting theme of her supposititious loss of flesh.

"Was it a real queen, Miss Edna?" she presently asked, very softly.

"Was what a queen?"

"The one I put you in mind of in the Skipio picture, to be sure—the Queen of the Goths?"

"Oh!" and here Edna could hold in no longer, but all but rolled on the floor in her unrestrained merriment.

Miss Libby would have turned pale if her atrocious corsets had let her, and, as it was, she became as grave as an owl.

"What are you yelling about?" she demanded.

"Not at me?"

"Not at all—oh, no! And yet—Oh, Libby, you'll just be the death of me!"

"Indeed!" with growing asperity.

Edna presently controlled herself sufficiently to tell what a perfect superb creature the queen

in the picture had impressed her with being, and the threatened breach was healed.

"Was the queen f—fat?" inquired the somewhat mollified Miss Libby.

"Not exactly that—but of grandly noble and majestic proportions, Libby, dear, just like yours."

"I don't care. I know I'm getting thinner every day."

"You shouldn't wish to lose an ounce. But you could easily determine the fact, if you're anxious to, by weighing yourself, say once a week."

"Me gettin' a scales, like a prize hog! No, thank you."

"Well, well," said Edna, growing a little wearied. "Content yourself with simply remaining handsome and hearty, then."

But the subject had become the poor girl's mania.

"But I'm not hearty—leastwise not so hearty as I was!" persisted Libby. "He thinks I'm fallin' off, anyway! That is, he's never hinted as how I'm a-gittin' any bigger."

"And who is he?"

"Mr. Willard."

"Oh!"

"I'll tell you all about him, Miss Edna!" cried Miss Libby, exuberantly. "He's too sweet for anything—so silent, so dignified, an' so mellerncholical! I know you'll like him, and yet—"

She had come to an embarrassed pause, that was not lost upon her quick-witted companion.

"Well, my dear; and yet—?"

"I forgot. And maybe I was mistaken, too."

"Tell me what you mean, you foolish woman!"

"Well, would you believe it? when I first mentioned your name to Mr. Edgar, he seemed to have heard of you before—or at least to be not altogether unfamiliar with your name—and he acted so strange."

Edna half-angrily felt that she was already changing color.

"Strange in what way, Libby?"

"I don't know. Somehow as if he knew something about you, an' had concaveaved a prejuice to your deeterment, you know. But Lord love you, miss, don't you be alarmed! It's only me he cares for. In fact he can't keep his eyes off me, 'specially when I'm standin' afore him."

"I sha'n't be alarmed," said Edna, quietly. "But hadn't we better be going down now? Mr. Langley, you know, who drove over with us, is going to stay to dinner."

"Langley, indeed!" and Miss Libby's pretty upper lip curled contemptuously as its owner stepped to the open window. "A widower of forty, if a day! But wait—there he is now!"

"Who, the sheriff?"

"Bah, no! Mr. Willard. And, bless me! if there ain't that ridiculous woman a-hauntin' an' a-naggin' of him again!"

"Who are you talking about?" asked Edna, slowly rising from a kneeling attitude before one of her trunks.

"Why, that crazy old Miss Raw, to be sure!"

Edna was now also at the window, and only to experience a sort of inexplicable nervous shock.

By what strange and occult sympathy were her heart-strings stirred, like a wind-harp's by a forgotten air, at the sight of the elegant, melancholy young man who had good-naturedly turned, in crossing the green lawn below, and was now being rather threateningly confronted by the prim, iron-faced Miss Raw of five years before, who seemed to have grown straighter, sterner and more military than ever?

"Ah, I remember that Miss Raw," said Edna, as composedly as she could. "Why should she haunt and annoy the young man as you intimate, Libby?"

"Why? Why, because she's a fool—a pestiferous old fool!"

Poor Miss Libby's malapropisms were ever the more original when prompted by excitement.

"But that is no answer, my dear Libby."

"Ah, miss, but don't you understand? Miss Raw was a sort of half-sister to the dead miser, and might perhaps have inherited a slice of the property at law, but for this unlooked-for return of Mr. Edgar. An' mebbe she ain't the only one that's sore, neither."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

They saw Mr. Willard get rid of his persecutrix—apparently by the exercise of some good-natured diplomacy—and then they went downstairs.

It was on the piazza, just before the ringing of the dinner-bell, that Edna Gray had her introduction to Mr. Edgar Willard.

Libby had apparently not exaggerated. The young man's manner, though profoundly courteous, was none the less markedly cold; and, after a few murmured commonplaces, he seemed positively relieved to be able to offer Miss Libby his arm at the sound of the bell, while Edna followed under Sheriff Langley's escort, the old ex-detective bringing up the rear with the farm-

wife, whose good-man had preceded the company in order to get in some advance on a giant sirloin roast that was the *piece de resistance* in prospect.

However, Edna was painfully conscious of Mr. Willard's eyes being often upon her face—stealthily and sorrowfully, rather than contemptuously, she thought—during the repast.

But she was hardly prepared for the young man, on finding her alone in the grove, several hours later, coming abruptly upon her, as he did, and saying, with ill-concealed agitation:

"Miss Gray, can you find it in your kindness to grant me a private talk? I—I had heard of you before, you see—and not very complimentarily, perhaps—and—and I think there may have been some misapprehension."

CHAPTER XII.

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW.

In response to this unexpected request, Edna slightly inclined her head, and coldly pointed to the other extremity of the rustic bench in which she was sitting.

Mr. Willard colored and hesitated.

"Pray do not think me bold, miss," he stammered, "but would you be good enough to step a little further back in the grove—somewhat more out of observation?"

He glanced nervously at the house, distinctly visible from that point of the grove, with a kitchen garden and a corner of orchard intervening.

As Edna only stared in response, the young man's painful embarrassment increased.

"Of course, my request must seem impudent on such short acquaintance—indeed, on hardly any at all," he managed to go on, confusedly. "Like enough you considered me distant and vain in my manner on being introduced to you, and—" "Oh!" with a sudden burst of confidence; "if you could but know all, Miss Gray! and—and it would be simply torture to be unexpectedly intruded on by that insufferably vulgar young person!"

"Do you allude to Miss Webb, sir?" Edna coldly inquired.

"Yes—that is, I know it was wrong, but"—gloomily—"how can a fellow help it?"

"Of course it is wrong to speak slightly of a lady in any event, and more especially for one who seems markedly attentive in the presence of others."

Mr. Willard at first stared, as if he had not quite understood, and then he burst into a short little laugh, so unaffected and boyish as far as it went that Edna was touched by it.

"I attentive to Miss Libby—and in a formal or significant way?" he exclaimed. "Oh, Lord, Miss Gray! what should I do with—with so much young lady? Why, I'm not a colossus, with arms a mile wide!"

Miss Gray smiled in spite of herself, and she arose.

But when they were seated together in a somewhat more secluded nook, in accordance with the young man's request, either his courage or his purpose seemed to forsake him.

Edna looked upon her companion critically, and with feelings of unaccountable interest, as he sat there trying to murmur some commonplaces, with slightly lowered and partly averted head, seemingly not wholly willing to meet her calm gaze; and yet she was puzzled, for evidently he was not a bashful or diffident young man constitutionally, and was doubtless fully able to hold his own even merrily in female society on occasion.

He was tall and graceful, with mobile dark features and sad black eyes of Spanish suggestiveness, as were also his close-curving black hair and small mustache of the same hue, the latter shading a handsome mouth apparently but little used to smiling, though capable of disclosing a magnificent set of teeth, and a certain weakness about the chin was redeemed by a more masculine and resolute expression of the jaw and forehead.

He was very modestly dressed in a well-fitting suit of dark, coarse flannel, and an insignificant watch-guard was his only ornament.

Altogether, and to all appearances, a very proper and agreeably seeming young gentleman, and perhaps also what is commonly understood as a woman's man by nature.

Edna was somewhat surprised to have her recollection of the mysterious Frank Harper brought to mind by Mr. Willard's appearance and manner; though the latter was considerably older-looking than the former had impressed her with being, and he was also of heavier and stronger build.

"I do wish I could make a beginning of what I wish to say, Miss Gray," said Edgar Willard at last, and with some impatience. "But the words won't come, for some reason."

"Perhaps it is the will that is lacking—suppose you let me assist you to your end," Edna observed, in a low voice. "You would speak with me of one Mr. Harper—Mr. Frank Harper."

"True! but how did you know it?" cried the young man, eagerly.

"Simply enough. I learned yesterday of your having met such a person in Montevideo,

and receiving from him the information that brought you here."

"Ah, yes! You knew Mr. Harper, Miss Gray?"

"I met him—once."

"But then on a memorable occasion?"

"The most memorable and the most miserable of my whole life!" in a yet lower tone.

"Am I at liberty to proceed with our talk in my own way, Miss Gray?"

"I shall probably offer no objection."

"Let me ask if you have recently obtained any further information of me personally, then?"

"But little, and that chiefly through my friend, Miss Libby."

"It was doubtless hardly to my detriment, then," muttered the young man, half-resentfully it seemed, as though he would willingly have had it otherwise from the source named.

"Rather to mine," said Edna, quietly.

"To your detriment, Miss Gray?"

"Well, the reverse of complimentary, at all events."

"Will you kindly explain your meaning?" And, seeing her hesitate, he added, very earnestly: "I beg of you to do so, Miss Gray! I am more than anxious."

"Oh, but you need not be, sir! It was not of enough importance. I was merely given to understand (don't lay it against Miss Libby, for it was only her natural exuberance) that you had manifested a dislike for me at first hearing the mention of my name—even before you had seen me."

"It is true, and without a particle of exaggeration," instantly admitted the heir of Willard Manse, with attractive frankness. "That," with sudden eagerness, "is why I have hastened to seek this interview, Miss Gray. I hadn't been in your presence five minutes before I began to think, to hope, almost to know that my impression must have been formed on a misconception. I was miserable and unhappy until I could confirm my error!"

"But of what consequence could it be?"

"Of every consequence—of far more than you can conceive of! Tell me frankly, Miss Gray, what did you think when you heard of my manifestation of a dislike for you, even at the bare mention of your name?"

"Think, indeed! Why should I have thought anything—or have cared either?"

"True, true! What a fool I am, after all!"

Edna was touched by his dejection.

"Well, I did think—there now!" she said, half-angrily. "Not that I cared one way or the other; but I—I understood the cause of your preconceived prejudice, and—and that caused me pain, because I was so certain that it was undeserved."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, for saying so much, Miss Gray! Do go on. You thought I might have imbibed my prejudice from Frank Harper? That was it, was it not?"

"It was."

"I knew it—I felt it."

"You knew that young man?"

"Intimately! I may even say that I came to know him as perfectly as I know myself."

"And he died—he is no more, I understand?"

Mr. Willard gravely inclined his head.

Edna's emotion was fast controlling her. She clasped her hands in her lap.

"Oh! there is one thing I so much want to know!" she faltered.

"As to how he died—what manner of man he had become? Is not that it, Miss Gray?"

"Yes, yes! but how could you know that?"

"I had become poor Harper's closest friend, his *alter ego*, you might say. He concealed nothing of his past life from me."

"Ah, sir! had he reformed, did he die truly repentant, and thus keep his sacred promise to me?"

"He did," solemnly. "He had become a changed, a reformed man from that hour, and an unhappy one!"

"Unhappy?"

"Could it have been otherwise with him, miss, when convinced in his own mind that you had been less faithful to your part of the engagement—the sacred compact, as it might be called?"

She gave a sharp little cry, that seemed to redouble her companion's sympathy and solicitude, already at a keen edge.

"Oh, that is what I most feared to know!" she all but moaned. "Don't spare me, Mr. Willard! He died cursing me?"

"He did not!" emphatically.

"What! Oh, sir; do tell me all!"

"Frank Harper died not cursing your memory, Miss Gray—that would have been impossible—but with a broken heart! with such sorrow as only can be felt over a hopelessly shattered idol, once cherished, once adored, but at last believed, perforce, unworthy, trivial, shrewed beyond its worth!"

The eloquent words were uttered slowly and reluctantly, in consideration for their bearer's evident suffering; for Edna had grown very pale, her eyes seeming to read what was coming before its enunciation with a painful intensity.

"Madness!" she ejaculated. "His idol? Impossible!"

"On the contrary, sadly, sorrowfully true, Miss Gray! He—loved you!"

Edna was grievously startled. She seemed to be hesitating between tears and hysterical laughter—so often in such brotherhood with tears in sensitive natures.

"But I do not, I cannot understand!" she managed to murmur. "He had seen me but once—that once."

"It was enough. Your sweet face had become indelibly impressed upon that strange softness in the heart of man, whose hardening with time yields its eidolon forever more—a fountain and a shrine! When it seemed to have failed, to have crumbled at last—after that the deluge?"

CHAPTER XIII.

EDNA'S OUTLOOK BRIGHTENS.

The tears were rolling down Edna's cheeks, and yet an unnatural calmness enabled her to control her voice.

"Of course, I could have known nothing of this," she said. "I—I am indescribably moved at what you have told me, sir."

"More's the pity! I should not have told you; I have acted a thankless and brutal part!"

"Don't say that. The truth should always be faced, even if—if an unhappy truth."

"Were you on the point of saying *unwelcome*, instead of *unhappy*?" demanded Mr. Willard, eagerly.

"No matter," confusedly. "It is enough that I did not say *unwelcome*."

"Oh, pardon me! but it is not enough."

"Why, pray?"

"Because if you did not say it because you could not truthfully—"

"Well, sir?" her maidenly pride was returning to her now.

"It then might have been inferred—pardon everything to my sincerity, Miss Gray!—that the knowledge of his having loved you, even thus unavailingly, to the end was the reverse of *unwelcome*, howsoever painful; that, in the same vague, spiritual way, you might even have reciprocated the sentiment."

"Sir!" And then she was meek and conscience-stricken again. "Oh, why should you ask me this? How should I know what to answer, when we had met but that once, when all that followed was so vague, so unreal and so dream-like? And what good could it do him now, even if I could say yes to what you ask—now that he has gone down to the grave believing me a weak and deliberately perjured wretch?"

Edgar was profoundly agitated.

"Forgive the query!—it could do no good, and was uncalled for," he pleaded, struggling. "Give me at least the satisfaction of knowing that my poor friend—your faithful but scarcely known lover—died under a most painful misapprehension as to your culpability. For I feel certain it was so, without having yet heard your assurance to that end."

"I assure you now, sir. He wronged me in his misapprehension—wronged me bitterly—I swear it!"

The young man's face became almost transfigured.

"God bless you for saying this!" he exclaimed with vehemence. "Oh! I had no sooner set eyes on your beautiful face, so as to read the purity of the soul that so transfuses its sweet lineaments— But what am I saying? Good Heavens! Miss Gray, pardon me."

She was looking at him curiously.

"Never mind, if you only chanced to forget yourself," she said, coldly.

"But I did forget myself, and it shall not occur again, Miss Gray, unless— Oh, it was the recollection of my friend Harper's anguish over your supposed treason; in fact I felt myself almost in his place, Miss Gray."

"Don't allude to it again, sir."

"Thank you, miss, thank you! May I then ask why and how you happened to reveal what you had sworn to conceal with regard to the tragedy you had witnessed?"

"You may, sir. I had sworn to reveal nothing *consciously*. I kept the letter, if not the spirit, of my oath."

"The secret—"

"Was torn from me without my knowledge or volition."

"You amaze me! In what way?"

"By my father's mesmerizing power. He is a wonderful mesmerizer, and I had from time to time been his 'subject,' as it is called. He suspected some painful burden on my mind, and relieved me of it—to his own satisfaction, at least. Now you have it all."

He looked at her in such astonishment that she forthwith told him the whole story, including that of the unsuccessful search for the body.

It was some time before the young man could collect himself sufficiently to speak, after his absorption of this, to him, astounding and gratifying piece of confidence.

Even then his emotion found better expression in his manner than in words.

Before Edna could be aware of his intention he seized her hand and raised it reverently to his lips.

"For our dead and unhappy friend!" said he,

impressively. "May he long ere this have made the gratifying and relieving justification that has been vouchsafed me from your lips today!"

Edna snatched away her hand much more suddenly than she might have done, for here there was a suspicious movement near them, and Miss Libby was seen laboriously stealing away from an eavesdropping nook with a convulsed face and as nearly an ashy complexion as was consistent with her superabundance of flesh.

Edna was reassured by an amused smile on Mr. Willard's lips, and it was also perceived that the escaping intruder was not conscious of having been detected.

"It is well to be on one's guard, Miss Gray," said he, in a low voice. "Therefore, make no mistake as to the nature and disposition of our fleshily inquisitive young lady."

"Have I been under a misapprehension thus far, think you?"

"I think so, judging by your allusions to her 'exuberance,' her 'good-nature,' and the like."

"What, then, is your judgment, sir?"

"A thorough hypocrite, arrant, fierce, and, upon provocation, revengeful and deadly!"

"Poor Miss Libby! I think you are too severe."

"Disabuse yourself of that impression. But wait; I can probably unmask another, yet more to be feared. She ought not to be far away."

And then, as Mr. Willard began to thrash about in some adjacent ferns and underbrush with his walking-stick, as if beating for game or snakes, the gaunt presence of Miss Raw was made known to them, rising slowly into view, and with a challenging look in her iron-like visage.

"What did I tell you?" he asked, with his pleasant smile, as this intruder likewise glided, or rather strode away, unabashed at her detection. "But forewarned is ever forearmed, Miss Gray."

Edna could not help being disconcerted by these incidents.

"That woman seems to haunt you unpleasantly, sir," she observed, as they retraced their steps in the direction of the house.

Mr. Willard laughed.

"I shall have to stand it," said he.

"Might I ask the cause of her animosity?"

"Oh, to be sure! I am the heir-at-law, don't you see? And if I had really been dead, as was fondly hoped by many, Miss Raw and others of my grandfather's distant relations might have stood some chance with the property, as no will was left. There are few things one so seldom forgives as disappointment, Miss Gray."

It is not in the purpose of our story to depict a love-making in its various stages, howsoever delightful to the participants, but rather to deal with what followed its outcome.

In less than a month after this interview, Edna Gray was returning to her room, after a long afternoon's drive with Mr. Edgar Willard, when she was confronted with Miss Libby.

"Dear Miss Edna!" exclaimed the daughter of the house, impulsively folding her in an unusually exuberant embrace; "you must take better care of yourself. You are looking flushed and flowstered!"

"Am I, though, Libby?" replied Edna, who was only conscious of feeling very happy. "It is odd, then; for I never felt better in my life." And she began to take off her hat and smarten up her hair before the glass.

"Oh, one is never a judge of oneself, my dear," said Miss Libby, seating herself composedly. "By the way, I really ought to tell you something."

It should be said that Miss Libby had seemed from the very first to have accepted the ruin of her unfounded hopes with regard to the heir of Willard Manse with the utmost equanimity, and had even appeared more gushing than ever in her tenderness for the city guest.

"Speak right out, then," said Edna, good-naturedly.

"Well, then, my dear, your going out so much with Mr. Edgar—so constant and conclusively," (she doubtless meant exclusively,) "you know—is causing a good-deal of remark."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; people will talk, you know."

"Some will, I am quite aware."

"This what I'm inclosin' to you, Miss Edna, is all for your own good," pursued Miss Libby, with owlish solemnity. "Don't furgit that."

"Anything to oblige you, of course!" cried the other, laughing out heartily. "But why shouldn't I go out with Mr. Edgar so much?"

"Mightn't he be a-conceivin' you? Is there any knowing what scandalous detections he might have had with other women down there in South Africa?"

Edna laughed again, but quickly grew grave.

"You *may* mean well, Libby; but I can't have you speaking of Mr. Willard to me in that way."

"Lord! an' why not, miss?"

"Because he—he has become more to me than other gentlemen."

"Has he popped?" almost yelled Miss Libby, frisking to her feet with a crash that shook the house.

When Edna could sufficiently control her risibilities, she indicated an affirmative.

Miss Libby suddenly burst into a flood of tears that was not unlike the giving way of a mountain dam in a springtide freshet, and once more was the young woman folded in her enormous embrace.

"Bless you, Miss Edna, bless you!" she sobbed. "These are tears of pure belief, my dear. It was in the hope that he would one day compose to you that I myself disected the first offer of his hand and heart."

"That was real good of you, Libby! But, let me go now, as I must go and find my father."

Mr. Gray seemed both pleased and regretful at what his daughter had to confide.

"I make no doubt he'll make you a good husband, as he certainly will a rich one, my love," said he. "But I feel real sorry for Jake Langley, though he must have seen that his cake was dough long before this."

"I'm sorry for him, too, father—that is, as sorry as I can be for anybody just now," said Edna, with a love-entranced smile. "For Mr. Langley is a good fellow."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MANSE AND ITS MYSTERIES.

EDNA, Edgar and Mr. Gray were at Willard Manse, overlooking the large number of workmen who were putting the pretentious but sadly-dilapidated old house in repair.

It was not Edna's first return thither, and, such is the effect of love, she had by this time conquered her olden dread of the Bleak Hollow locality. The marriage was fixed for the first of September. Edgar's claim to the estate had at last been legally admitted, under certain reservations; money in plenty was at his disposal; he had had less difficulty than he expected in persuading his affianced that the home of his ancestors was the fittest in which to begin their married life; and now he was sparing no expense in putting both house and grounds in thorough repair.

Of course, the heir was as much a stranger to the place as any one else, and he was equally interested with his companions in the many odd nooks and corners that were being revealed in the old house by the improvements in progress.

On this occasion the foreman came to where the trio were standing, and, touching his cap to the new proprietor, said:

"It's a queer discovery we've made just off the late Mr. Willard's sleeping-room, sir. Will you come?"

They accompanied him to the spacious bedroom, formerly occupied by the miser, and in which the murder was supposed to have been committed.

Together with most of the remaining rooms, it had been denuded of its furniture, and two or three men were repairing the floor and wainscoting.

In one wall was perceived a built-in fire-proof safe, whose door was wide open, disclosing the emptiness within; and just below was an iron-bound strong box, fastened to the floor and wall, likewise empty and open.

Edna could look upon these things with only a passingly disagreeable sensation now, notwithstanding that they were probably just as they had been left by the murderers, after being burst open and rifled of their contents.

She was, however, quickly attracted by a gloomy and unusual agitation, which seemed to have taken possession of her betrothed from the moment of his crossing the threshold of the fatal chamber.

He seemed strangely ill at ease, and wished to be gone.

"What is your discovery?" he abruptly demanded of the foreman. "Not those?" indicating the safe and box. "They explain themselves, and I have been advised of them before."

"No, sir, not those. Look!"

The man touched a concealed spring in the wainscoting of an adjoining wall, and a cunningly disguised door slowly opened outward.

It revealed the interior of a small apartment, like a prison cell in both size and furnishings, and lighted by a grated window so narrow that its presence could hardly have been suspected in the thick wall, viewed from the outside.

"This is very strange," muttered Edgar. "Who could have been the occupant of this cell?"

And, accompanied by his companions, he stepped into it, and looked curiously around.

"Haw, haw, haw! He, he, he!" sounded a mirthless laugh behind them; and all turned to perceive Miss Raw looking grimly in upon them.

"It's only the old scarecrow!" said the foreman, shrugging his shoulders. "She follows us from room to room ever since we've been to work here. Has she your permission, sir?"

"And he looked up to young Willard, inquiringly.

Before the latter could reply, Miss Raw was beforehand with him.

"Scarecrows sometimes hav more sense than chuckleheads!" she shouted, as if giving commands to a regiment. "I know who ocker pied that 'ere den, eff you don't!"

"Tell us, then, Miss Raw, I beg of you," said Edgar, in the patient tone he was accustomed to adopt with her. "Who did occupy the cell?"

"One as is no more," was the response, in a profoundly sepulchral tone.

"But who was the person?"

"Find out!" And she marched off so stiffly that one half-expected to hear the clanking of a cavalry saber at her heels.

"Make no change at present," said Mr. Willard. "And as for the eccentric lady, if she doesn't seriously annoy you, she can have her will at roaming around here, at least for a while."

"Oh, she isn't annoying, sir," returned the foreman, bustling away. "Fact is, we find the old gal rather amusing than troublesome."

The party made the tour of the entire interior of the old house, and then returned to their original station on the lawn, at the head of the driveway, where a number of rustic seats had been placed.

Edgar turned to his lovely betrothed with the grave tenderness that had done much toward winning her heart.

"I think we shall be able to make the old hole homelike, my darling," said he. "Don't you?"

Edna's happy smile was a sufficient answer.

"Why, of course you will!" interposed Mr. Gray, in his blunt, practical way. "It's a fine old country place that any man ought to be proud of. I think I'd rip out some of the old nooks and crannies in the house, though, Edgar."

"That shall be done, sir!" cried the young man, eagerly. "By the way, what did you think, sir, of the foreman's latest discovery? You must have had so much experience in the secret corridor and chamber line."

"Perhaps so. I may take a look at that secret chamber again."

Here the foreman put his head out of one of the upper windows, and indicated by signs that yet another interesting discovery had been made.

Edna remained seated while her father and Willard re-entered the house.

She was hardly alone before her attention was attracted by a sort of harsh, cackling call, and she perceived Miss Raw standing on the opposite side of the driveway, and at the head of a narrow path that seemed to wind off down among the shrubbery and trees.

"Come here, you!" called out the strange woman. "That is, if you ain't afeard. I want you!"

Much as Edna disliked the woman, she did not fear her in the least, and an uncontrollable curiosity induced her to obey, even while wondering at herself for doing so.

"You evidently think you've got a dead sure thing in that gold-buckled, diamond-fastened young feller of yours, don't you?" said Miss Raw, placing her gaunt arms akimbo, with her surest and most exasperating expression. "And he—oh, yes, he doubtless imagines he's all hunk fur the estate, an' no one to say him nay. Well jest you foller down that path a spell," with a directing gesture, "an' mebbe you'll see why you're both on you countin' your chickens afore the shells is bu'sted."

"Are you out of your senses, Miss Raw, or what do you mean?" impatiently demanded the young woman, yet with her sudden curiosity steadily increasing.

Miss Raw gave a contemptuous snort, in her most war-horse or war-trumpet manner.

"Dare to find out what I mean!" she taunted. "Dare to foller that path alone and find out."

"Since you are not to accompany me, I'll do so," returned Edna, with a disdainful laugh. "Though it is only my foolish curiosity that prevents me ordering you to go about your business, m'am."

And she forthwith did so, with a fearless and springing step.

Presently, however, the bird-songs and sunshine seemed to die out of the trees, and she at last came to a terrified pause in an open space, whose features were more or less familiar.

She was once more at the scene of her tragic adventure, at the bottom of Bleak Hollow, having unwittingly approached it by the path leading down circuitously from the Manse lawn.

However, Edna had long since shaken off her superstitious memories of the place, and was about to advance with a resolute step when she perceived an old man, standing, in a stooping posture, with his back toward her, over the very spot where she had seen the murdered miser buried.

She stopped and coughed, whereupon the man erected himself and turned.

Then a shriek of supreme terror was frozen on the young woman's lips.

Erect before her, with a scowling and suspicious look, was, to the best of her belief, the old man whose lifeless remains she had seen buried—John Willard, the miser of Willard Mansle!

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

At first Edna was surprised at her own nerve and presence of mind.

She controlled herself sufficiently to note that,

though the person before her ought to have been an apparition, in the logic of past events, he seemed to be nothing of the kind.

In fact, though the man's face was repellently cunning, secretive and evil, there was nothing ghostly or in the least degree superhuman in his aspect.

While shabbily dressed, he at the same time gave the impression that he was possessed of ample means; and he carried in one hand a faded gripsack, as if bent on a journey, or newly returned from one, and in the other a long slender bamboo wand, resembling an angling pole, but forking at the smaller end into three tips, which glistened as if made of silver or platinum.

He bent his cunning gaze curiously upon the young woman, and when he began to speak, which he did after a long pause, her superstitious fears were strangely enough revived with a sort of shock; for his voice was hollow and sepulchral, and there was something unearthly in the malignity that occasionally glinted in his cruel gray old eyes.

"So," sneered the Presence, as we shall call him, "you're the young lady who saw me dead and buried, eh?"

Edna's curiosity was a good foil for her terror; and, forcing back some degree of composure, she managed to reply:

"If the evidence of my senses was not wholly at fault, sir, I certainly did see you thus disposed of a little more than five years ago. You are now standing on the very grave in which I saw your lifeless body interred."

The Presence leaned upon his strange staff, and laughed noiselessly.

"True, true!" he chuckled. "But I did not remain in the grave, eh?"

"No; you did not. What, then, became of your remains, sir?"

He suddenly became very serious.

"Follow me," said he, authoritatively. "I will show you."

He strode to one side, straight into a wall of bushes and evergreens, which seemed to open before him, revealing the entrance to a secret path all but obliterated by grasses and weeds, and Edna managed to follow, though feeling now as if she were in a species of waking dream.

The path was so tortuous and narrow that her skirt was torn by the thorns and prickly vines that hemmed it in, but which did not seem to discommode her strange guide in the least.

At last he came to a pause. The path had ended at the foot of a large and lofty rock, partly curtained with running vines, where there was a small, comparatively-open space.

"Look at me!" said the Presence, with a secretive smile. "With this divining wand of mine in your possession, you might have discovered my buried body without my assistance. For there is gold on the body, and wherever there is gold buried this wand, which is the treasure-seeker's friend, infallibly indicates the exact spot."

He was waving the queer staff slowly over his head as he spoke.

Whether it afforded him any token or not, he presently picked up a stone from the ground, which had steadily grown more stony and sterile as they proceeded, and cast it, saying:

"Mark where this falls, for the spot thus indicated will be my second grave, where my body reposes undisturbed at last."

Edna did mark where the stone fell, and then when she again turned to question her extraordinary guide, he had disappeared.

She rubbed her eyes and stared.

The Presence could not have passed her on the narrow path—her own figure filled it completely; he could not have gone to right or left, by reason of the impenetrable barriers of hazels and prickly vines; nor yet on over the perpendicular rock any more than straight into its granite breast; and yet he had vanished absolutely.

What could it have been but an apparition, the phantom of the murdered miser?

Her sense of the supernatural at last recurred to her with a sudden shock, and, as if to complete her terrified bewilderment, a hateful laugh at this instant caused her to turn.

There was Miss Raw contemplating her with something ferociously-taunting in her smile.

Edna could bear no more.

Shriek after shriek burst from her white lips; she was conscious, in spite of her terror, of a mad desire to spring upon the hideous woman, and strangle her, and of being only withheld by a refusal of her frame to answer to her wish; and then she knew no more.

She recovered on the same spot to find herself in her lover's arms, while her father was trying to force some brandy between her lips from a flask.

They had just come to her aid, summoned thither by her shrieks, and both were looking very anxious.

"What in the world brought you to this wild, God-forsaken spot, my dear, and across Bleak Hollow, too, for all the world?" exclaimed Mr. Gray.

"Do not ask her now," tenderly suggested Willard. "Wait till the poor child is thoroughly composed."

But, to their surprise, Edna got at once upon her feet, and collected herself almost instantly.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, hurriedly, but without panic. "Now that you are here, there can be no better time than the present for clearing up this horrible mystery. Where is that hideous creature?"

They looked at her inquiringly.

"Miss Raw, I mean! Did you not meet her when you came running up this path?"

"No; neither of them had seen Miss Raw since in the foreman's presence, half an hour previously.

"Ah! you could not, then, have come to my aid without some delay."

But there had been no delay. Her screams were still in the air, when, guided solely by them, they had found their way into and rushed along the unsuspected secret path.

Edna looked around her.

"Where could the woman have gone?" she murmured. "Could she, too, have had the phantom's power of disappearing into the very air?"

She then related what had happened to the minutest detail.

But the astonishment of her hearers was more easily evoked than their credulity.

Willard, it is true, listened to the extraordinary tale with a sort of troubled gravity and perplexity; but hard-headed Mr. Gray—Springsteel Steve—who had about as much respect for the so-called supernatural as a Scotch collie has for the Covenanters' creed, shook his head grimly.

"You must consult a good physician without delay, my child," was his first comment. "This will never do."

"What will never do, father?"

He tapped his forehead suggestively.

"What you saw five years ago, my dear, was all right. It sounded fishy enough, in all conscience, but it was more or less corroborated. But when a person gets to seeing ghosts of old men who are murdered and buried, then the pill-peddler should be called in to take a hand, without any delay."

"Thank you, father; you are very considerate, but I require neither pills nor pill-peddlers. I have described nothing but what I saw."

"Then Mr. Miser Willard must still be alive and active, in spite of what you also saw so certainly five years ago!" persisted Mr. Gray.

"Ghosts don't hold matter-of-fact conversations with one, after the manner you have described, besides pointing out where they themselves are lying buried. It won't wash."

Edna turned appealingly to Edgar, who had been reflecting with knitted brows.

"There is an easy way to get at confirmation for some of this mystery," said he, kissing her reassuringly. "Pray wait me here. I shall not be long."

He disappeared down the path, and when he again presented himself he was accompanied by the foreman of the workmen and another man, both bearing picks and spades.

From the two men's eager and interested look, it was evident that something of Edna's adventure had been disclosed to them, as a preparation of what might be demanded at their hands.

Edna had already indicated the spot where the pebble tossed by the Presence had fallen, and the men were soon hard at work on the stubborn ground with their implements.

The ground was gravelly and hard, with mineral suggestions, and digging in it was slow work.

Edna and Edgar looked on with an intense degree of interest, which even the old detective could not help sharing in a certain measure.

"Has that ground ever been dug over before, think you?" he asked, as the two men came to a sweating pause to rest.

"Yes, sir, or there was a natural hole here at one time that's since been filled," replied the foreman. "Otherwise we could make mighty little impression on it."

As an illustration, he struck his pick into the ground in an undisturbed spot, and the hard-driven point, after penetrating a thin layer of stony soil seemed to encounter a surface as hard as iron.

"Something petrifying in the soil, too!" continued the foreman. "Look there!" And he tossed out of the half-hollowed trench several specimens of what seemed to be wooden twigs and chips turned into stone.

Then the digging was resumed, and it presently grew much easier.

At last even Mr. Gray looked down upon the result of the labor with unmitigated astonishment and awe.

A body had been disentombed, and lifted on the edge of the trench with much difficulty, because of its unusual weight.

It was the corpse of a man, partly petrified and in a wonderful state of preservation, rolled in an old rug, likewise in good condition.

The face, upon being uncovered, was the same that Edna had seen five years before—the face of an old man, with wide-staring stony eyes and blood-dabbled white beard—the face, to all appearances, of the murdered miser of Willard Mansle!

CHAPTER XVI.
"AFTER MANY DAYS."

EDNA broke up under the revelation better than might have been expected of her, while the feelings of her father and the two workmen were evidently more of curiosity or satisfaction than of horror.

But for a moment or two Edgar Willard's agitation was truly pitiable, notwithstanding that, from the fact of his having never seen his grandfather alive, to the best of his recollection, it might have been less looked for in him than in any other.

"This is horrible!" he murmured, gazing upon the petrified face with starting eyes. "Great God! it is like the genius of murder turned into marble. Edna!" in a hoarse whisper, "was the realistic phantom you saw and conversed with like—that?"

He pointed shudderingly at the body.

Edna nodded circumspectly, for the workmen had been told nothing of her ghostly experience, as it might be called, but merely that she had received an overpowering premonition which it was determined to refute or verify, and it was not advisable to enlighten them further.

"Yes," she murmured. "The mysterious person was its exact image, save that he was dressed as if for a journey, with the strange wand and the grip-sack, though, of course, the face was not deathlike, and there was no—no blood on the beard. But do not be so panic-stricken, Edgar! You alarm me."

He strove to master himself, while his prospective father-in-law slapped him on the back.

"Nonsense, man! What is there to shudder at now?" the latter exclaimed, heartily. "You ought to rejoice to the bottom of your boots. An inquest can now remove the last lingering doubt as to the old man's actual death, and your position as heir is secure from this time forth."

There was an approving nod from the workmen, both of them White Plains men, to whom the controversy of five years before was still a familiar story.

Edgar shook off something of his horror, and grew more composed.

"You are right, my friend, you are right!" he acquiesced. "Yes, this is a matter for the coroner, and for no one else. Come, we will send for him at once, and in the mean time leave this—this discovery under watch and guard."

Here there was a cackling sort of laugh, and they turned to perceive the inevitable Miss Raw.

"I'll stand guard, Mr. Young Man from South Ameriky!" she cried. "I kin do it, fur he was my relative, you know, even eff he ain't dead yet."

Her presence, no less than her contradictory words, seemed for the first time to thoroughly incense Mr. Willard.

He grasped her by the arms, and shook her roughly.

"Woman, my patience with you is at an end!" he exclaimed, sternly. "Not only shall you not remain here, to insult the dead, but from this time forth you shall not be permitted to set foot on property of mine!"

She would have retorted, but that, for the moment at least, his unexpected fury cowed her.

"Begone!" he continued. "You are become insufferable. Unless it shall prove that you are demented, I from this moment renounce the kindly intentions I have had in your favor, and not a stiver shall you receive from my bounty. You are an ingrate, and no true woman—a disgrace to the sex you scandalize and burlesque in your miserable personality. Begone, I say! and let me never look upon you more!"

He cast her roughly from him.

Without a word, but with a weird look of hatred and menace in her scared, convulsed face, she turned, and disappeared down the narrow, thorny path.

Before the close of that day, the coroner's inquest had been most satisfactorily held over the remains, that were at last fully identified as those of John Willard, the long-missing, long-in-mysterious-doubt miser of Willard Hall.

In the light of former revelations, it was found that he had murderously come to his death at the hands of four men, described as O'Meara, Harper, Swart and Timmins.

The remains were reinterred in the family plot in the White Plains Cemetery; Edgar Willard was completely established as the sole and unquestioned heir of the estate; and for the public at large the mystery was regarded at an end.

Edna kept her own counsel as to her meeting with the dead man's living double; Miss Raw judiciously kept herself in the background; the repairs of the manse and grounds were satisfactorily completed; and the marriage was duly and to all appearances most happily solemnized, in the presence of an immense wedding-party at Willard Manse, which had been transformed into one of the handsomest and best kept country places round about Purchase and White Plains.

A year had passed, and another summer was spent amid the Westchester hills.

The veteran detective was a guest at the manse, where, indeed, and naturally enough, he

spent the greater part of his time; Edna Willard was a happy mother, no less than a contented and idolized wife; Edgar was no longer a melancholy but a thoroughly satisfied man, fortunate in his wife, his home, his wealth and his friends; and indeed, it seemed as if the old place, once the synonym of tragic mystery for the country-side, was henceforth to be little less than an earthly paradise of love and joy.

But where is there a sky so pure as to be without its coming cloud? An earthly happiness so secure as to safely bid defiance to what the morrow may have in store?

One day Edna, her husband and her father were driving in the neighborhood, the young wife and the nurse, with the baby Edgar in her arms, occupying the rear seat of the stylish Surrey, when an odd incident occurred.

They were driving gently through a wooded strip of road when Edna alone chanced to perceive a seedy-looking man, little better than a common tramp in appearance, standing at the edge of a wood, with his eyes fastened upon her husband so intently, and so malignantly as it seemed to her, that her wifely heart took alarm at once.

"Wait! Stop the carriage, Edgar!" she called out.

Then, as he complied, drawing in the spirited team with considerable suddenness, she told him and her father what she had seen.

"Nothing great in that, since a cat may look at a king," said Mr. Gray. "But still—one can't always sometimes tell, as the Dutchman said."

And, jumping down from his seat at Edgar's side, he went back briskly to the point at which the suspicious character was described to have been seen.

Edna was uneasy, for she had remarked a look that she did not like—a look almost of consternation—come into her husband's face at her first mention of the man's scrutiny, though he was now thoroughly composed.

"I wonder why he should have eyed you so strangely?" said she.

"Perhaps I have a generally wealthy and profitable appearance, such as is dear to the tramp-heart," he replied, with the smile that had grown so dear to her.

"But the man didn't look exactly like a tramp, Edgar."

"What was he like, then? Whoa, there—steady!"

"I don't know—it was a mere glimpse—but his expression was so evil and blood-curdling, as his eyes fastened on you—such a devouring, eager and even triumphant look!"

"My dear Edna, don't!" And he simulated a shudder. "Do you want to spoil my night's rest for a month to come?"

Here Mr. Gray returned, saying that the fellow had made off through the woods.

"Didn't you get sight of him at all?" was Edgar's careless question, as the drive was resumed.

"Not of his full face," replied Mr. Gray. "A middle-aged and doubtless unimportant stranger. I only wanted to have a comprehensive glance at the fellow on general principles."

"Why so?"

"You've read of those mysterious garroting revivals in Harlem, that have even crept up as far as White Plains?"

"Yes."

"Well, my theory is that they have all been the work of a single operator. There's a singular individuality betrayed in every case, as described in the police reports. At all events, I'm naturally on the lookout, and never meet a suspicious-looking stranger who escapes my scrutiny."

"Oh, is that all?" And with a merry flick of the whip and a corresponding grip of the reins, the proprietor of Willard Manse sent the team a-spinning.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

OCTOBER was at hand, and the incident of the drive, if worthy of the name of incident, had been wholly forgotten.

But one afternoon, when Edna was alone at the Manse with her servants, her husband having driven over to the Plains and her father being absent in New York on business, the housemaid came to her with the message that an awful man was at the door, demanding to see Mr. Willard.

Edna, who had dropped her latest novel, and was engaged in the delightful pastime of dandling and loving her baby to her heart's content, passed the sturdy little heir over to his nurse, and looked up in some surprise.

"An awful man!" she repeated. "What is there awful about him?"

"He's orffully bad dressed, m'am," replied the maid, "and somehow he don't look good or nice."

"Well, you told him Mr. Willard wasn't at home?"

"Yes, m'am; but he says that you'll do, m'am."

"Oh, indeed; very condescending, truly;

though I might not meet his approval after all. Tell him my husband will see him to-morrow—make him go away!"

The girl went away with the message, but was speedily back.

"Please, m'am, he won't go!"

"Won't go? Call the coachman and gardener—but wait! This is very strange. Does the man persist in wishing to see me?"

"Yes, m'am; and he hopes you won't send him away right off. Says he knew the master's old friends real intimate in South America."

"Oh; well, show him into the reception-room. I will be down."

But Edna was no sooner confronted by the stranger, than she gave an inward start.

It was the same man whom she had detected eying her husband so devoutly from the edge of the wood, a couple of months before.

But he was a little less trampish-looking than then. A stockily-built man of fifty, or thereabouts, with prematurely snow-white mustache and imperial, close-cropped curling gray hair, a florid complexion, stolid features and a sinister eye, and a somewhat military brusqueness in his air, which one was at a loss to associate with the air of a decayed gentleman, or of a scoundrel in bad luck.

"Pray keep your seat, sir," said Edna, motioning the man back as he was in the act of rising. "Your name, if you please."

He produced an elegant card-case, in odd contradiction with his other belongings, and handed her a card, bearing the name:

"CAPTAIN ORLANDO PEREZ,

"Second Artillery,

"Of the Army of Uruguay."

"Of course, I do not know you, sir," said Mrs. Willard, after a careless glance at the address. "But why could you not have sent your card to me by the servant?"

Captain Perez was very polite, with a noticeable foreign accent.

"For the reason that you have been good enough to state, madam—because my name then would not have made you know me any better than now," he replied.

"Still—however, it makes no difference. I have only consented to see you at all, sir, under protest, as I wish you to understand."

The visitor bowed submissively, with his hand upon his heart.

As he did so she remarked that he wore a diamond ring, in keeping with the contradictory card-case.

"Am I to understand, sir, that you were acquainted with my husband, Mr. Edgar Willard, in South America?" continued the lady.

"Not so much with him, perhaps, ma'm, as with a very intimate friend of his."

"What friend?"

"A certain Señor Frank Harper."

To say that Edna was now thoroughly interested, is but feebly to characterize her feelings.

"Ah!" with forced composure, "I have heard of the gentleman as being my husband's intimate friend when living."

"Living, ma'm! Are you so sure, then, that Mr. Harper is dead?"

"Quite sure, since he died in my husband's arms."

"Ah, indeed! *Caramba!* but we come and we go! It's a queer world, with few favors for the best of us!"

"You could not have come recently from Uruguay, sir?"

"Humph! perhaps not so very recently. Why does the señorita ask?"

"Otherwise you would scarcely have been ignorant of Mr. Harper's death till now."

"Ah!"

"And, moreover, you do not seem particularly affected by the intelligence from me."

"And wherefore should I, ma'm. We come and we go in this kaleidoscope of a world at every shake of Fate, the dicer's hand, and, after one gets to be fifty or so, one gets callous to the changes—the comings and goings."

"Still, if he were your friend?"

"A chance friend, an *amigo*, and no more. Poor devil! I shall hold the tribute tear in reserve."

Edna secretly resented the heartless indifference of the man's tone and manner.

"If," she said, with an unmistakable gesture, "it is simply on the strength of a chance acquaintance with a whilom friend in common that you have presumed to seek out Mr. Willard, sir, I doubt if it will be worth your while to call again."

Captain Perez arose, and once more laid his not over-clean but jeweled hand on his breast as he bowed with labored courtesy.

"Excuse me for disagreeing with you, ma'm," he murmured, with his disagreeable smile. "But Captain Orlando Perez, of the Army of the Republic of Uruguay, never does a thing not worth his while—especially when he has good fish to fry, and lacks but the fire to warm the bottom of the pan. Moreover, he does not intend to call again—at least in the final sense that madam, Mr. Edgar Willard's consort, obviously means."

Springsteel Steve.

The mistress of Willard Manse was fast losing patience.

"You are unnecessarily wordy, sir," said she, also rising with some peremptoriness. "Why shall you not call again to see my husband, as I advise?"

"Because I shall prefer to await his return here."

"Sir, you are not only presumptuous, you are insolent! Good-day to you!"

The rogue saw his mistake, but only when it was too late.

"Madam," he began, persistently, "if I have unwittingly—"

"Quit the house instantly, or it will be the worse for you." She touched the bell, as he was going, and with very little ceremony. "Let me also advise you, Captain Orlando Perez, of the Army of the Republic of Uruguay—and I really hope there won't be any national complications over this affair—that our house-dogs are both numerous and unfriendly, when approached without an authenticated introduction. Mary," to the servant, now making her appearance on the front piazza, to which the parting scene had been gradually transferred, "note this impudent person thoroughly."

"Yes, ma'm," and Mary courtesied with a grin.

"He's not to be admitted again, unless by Mr. Willard's express orders to the contrary. You will notify your fellow-domestics accordingly—especially Patrick, the coachman, and Albert, the gardener."

"Yes, ma'm."

And at this juncture Albert, a gigantic Swiss, and as formidable-looking as a Papal body-guard, hove in sight around the path, with a mighty spade over his shoulder and murderous possibilities in his phlegmatic eye.

But the visitor, who had by this time reached the lowest step, did not seem a whit discomfited.

He was making his last bow, with his hand on his heart, and as much *sang froid* as if he were being dismissed with all the honors of the house at his disposal.

"Mr. Willard may not remember me by name," said he, blandly. "Therefore, if madam, in making my acknowledgments to him, will but deign to mention a single phrase—a sort of old pass-word between friends—it will bring me and certain services distinctly to his recollection."

"Very well, sir," replied Edna, now considerably mollified, "what is the phrase with which I am to awaken his recollection?"

"It consists of but two words, ma'm—*Bleak Hollow!*"

And with that the unwelcome visitor strode carelessly away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

It may well be imagined that the strange visitor's parting words were such as to awaken vague uneasiness in Edna Willard's consciousness.

She waited anxiously for her husband's return, and when she did see him at last galloping up the drive on his favorite black saddle-horse, her heart for some reason grew heavy within her.

Edgar was a superb horseman, as most Spanish-Americans are, and he was looking so full of manly grace and happiness on this occasion, that she found herself full of unaccountable apprehension, lest the news of that sinister man's visit should in some way darken his spirits and perhaps his very home.

The forebodings of the young wife were in some degree verified.

Willard first heard of the man's description with ill-concealed uneasiness, and Edna could not but remark that he listened to the details of the visit with his face more persistently bowed over the crowing infant, which he had taken in his arms, than was altogether natural, as if he would conceal its changes from her.

When he looked up at last, however, he was thoroughly composed.

"When was your father to return from the city, my dear?" were the first words he spoke.

"This evening, or in the morning, he thought," was her reply.

"Ah, I'm glad of that!" and he at once brightened up. "I shall surely," with emphasis, "be on hand when our Uruguayan captain makes his second call."

Edna at once felt relieved, though not entirely so.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she said.

"Why so?" and he looked up from the baby, to kiss her. "You—you didn't fear anything for me, darling?"

"Not exactly that, but— Oh, I forgot to tell you the man's parting phrase, a sort of pass-word he called it, by which he was certain to be recalled to your recollection. And that, more than anything else, made me anxious."

"Indeed! a pass-word that you were to give me, eh?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"*Bleak Hollow.*"

The muscles in Edgar's face tightened, as if he had prepared for something of the sort.

"It was not necessary," said he, coldly. "I should have recalled the man by your description, without it. Think no more of it, my love. And let us go down to dinner; my ride has given me a rare appetite."

But Edna could not dismiss the matter so summarily from her mind, and the boasted appetite when put to the test sadly belied its vaunt.

Edgar could only dally with his food, excellent and varied as it was; for the manse cooking was one of the wonders of the country-side under the new dispensation; and he seemed to fall into and rouse himself out of unpleasant reveries by fits and starts.

"Do tell me what it is!" she murmured persuasively, a little later.

They were again alone, and she was nestling closely to his side, after her accustomed way in the gathering dusk, while he consumed cigarette after cigarette in the broad and stately piazza overlooking the lawn and the drive.

He made no attempt at evasion, either from his natural hatred of subterfuge, or because he knew how little it would avail him with her.

"I can't tell you everything, my darling—at least not now," the young man answered, slowly, as if collecting his nerve. "But I do confess that the prospect of an interview with this man oppresses me."

"Can't I help you?"

"Not now; though I am in hopes that your father can."

"Take me just a little into your confidence, then—won't you?"

"Perhaps so." And he smoothed her pretty blonde hair with his hand.

"Well, then, who is this man?"

"Other than he pretends—a rascal, a blood-sucker and a villain!"

"So I should have judged. But isn't his name Perez, and isn't he a Uruguayan officer, at all?"

"Oh, he may have been all that, among other things."

"An adventurer?"

"Ay, and a desperate one. But," half to himself, "even he may over-reach himself yet."

"But how strange, dear, that he should not have heard of Mr. Harper's death!"

She felt the strong arm partly encircling her tremble, and then stiffen out strongly.

"That is odd!" Edgar admitted. "One would have thought him cognizant of that."

"Still," Edna went on, "he half-acknowledged that he was not very recently from Uruguay."

"Ah, that would explain it, then."

"Still I am greatly puzzled, dear."

"At what?"

"From what I have been impressed with regarding Mr. Harper, he must have been a sensitive and refined young gentleman."

"I think he was all that."

"Then how could he have been on terms of intimacy with such a fellow as this Perez?"

"How do you know that he was?"

"I only surmise, Edgar. How else, except through Mr. Harper's confidence—or yours, which is not to be thought of—could he know anything about Bleak Hollow here?"

"True; I hadn't thought of that. Well, poor Harper was an odd fish, after all, full of contradictions and inconsistencies."

After a long silence, during which she nestled yet closer and more lovingly to her husband's side as the dusk slowly deepened and thickened, Edna was suddenly impressed with a new and painful thought.

"What is it, my love?" he tenderly asked, having felt her start.

"Oh, Edgar! if this man should have some secret power over you?"

Another tremor and renewed bracing of the strong arm incircling her.

"Nonsense!" after a long pause. "Don't borrow trouble, my love."

"But if he *should*, Edgar?"

"Ah, supposing the case, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, what then?"

"Oh, Edgar! then, indeed, I should tremble for you."

"Why?"

"Because that man would show no mercy! He would be incapable of it. You vaguely characterized him as a bloodsucker. But he is worse than that, or my intuitions are at fault, as they have never been before—a soul-snatcher! a born devil! That is what he would prove to the man so unfortunate as to find himself in his power!"

Her vehemence seemed to strike him disagreeably.

Almost roughly, he turned her face toward him, and gazed sternly, suspiciously into her eyes through the dimness, as if he wished yet feared to read her inmost thoughts.

"What is all this, Edna?" he demanded. "Do you already suspect me of being in that villain's power?"

"No, no; God forbid!"

He again embraced her, or would have done so, but that she suddenly started away, pointing off over the lawn to the driveway.

"Look, Edgar, look!" she gasped. "It is your fate to see it, no less than mine. Your grandfather's phantom, or his double—look!"

But he was already staring at the object with his very heart in his eyes.

The presence was plainly enough visible, notwithstanding the twilight that seemed rather to emphasize its aspect than otherwise. An old, disagreeable, repellent man, shabbily attired, as on the occasion of Edna's first seeing him, and, as then, with his gripsack and queer staff, as if newly from or about starting out on a journey. The figure stood at the head of the narrow path, down which Miss Raw had directed Edna on the previous occasion. His face was turned toward the young couple with a half-snaring, half-deprecating expression, that was not wholly forbidding.

Edgar had recovered his presence of mind and was now resolute.

"Come, this thing has got to be explained now or never!" he muttered; and then, with his wife still clinging to his side, he sternly descended from the piazza and walked straight toward the figure.

"Stand back!" called out the latter at last. "What, grandson, aren't you content even when you've got me under ground in the cemetery? Bah! keep the estate. Perhaps you deserve it. But there's more gold at the beck of this divining-rod than kings could store away!"

He shook the wand as he spoke, and then vanished from their view, though almost within their grasp.

"Edgar, what do you think?" asked Edna, after a long pause.

"It was no phantom, my child—it was my grandfather in flesh and blood!" exclaimed the young man, earnestly. "I saw him before but once in my life, and then under distressing associations when I was but three years old, but his face and form have remained indelibly fixed in my mind. That was my grandfather."

CHAPTER XIX.

A WIFE'S DEVOTION.

"Or his double!" echoed Edna.

But Edgar Willard shook his head.

"Doubles, if they exist at all—which I cannot believe—are not real, not substantial," said he, moodily. "They would not act, look and speak in that matter-of-way."

"But the vanishing of the—the man was mysterious enough."

"Anything could be made to *seem* mysterious in this fading light."

"True—perhaps. But the petrified remains in the tomb?"

"I don't know—it is very strange. Unless my grandfather might have had a double while living, and murdered instead of himself, though that seems preposterous, the whole thing is unaccountable."

"Well," continued Edna, as she led the way back to the piazza, "I am not sorry that you have had this experience, in support of mine, Edgar."

"Why, my love?" and she was rejoiced to see that he was actually beginning to recover his good spirits.

"Because," she replied, "I do not see how my father's incredulity can hold out against your testimony, united with mine."

"Ah, your father! how I wish he were here now!" and something of the young man's troubled moodiness seemed to return.

Edna very wisely refrained from returning to the subject of Captain Perez's visit, seeing plainly that Edgar had even welcomed the ghostly episode, as it might be called, in the way of affording him a relief from the further discussion of that.

But she, none the less, passed a bad night with turning the possibilities of the matter over in her mind, and her husband's manner on the following day was not such as to reassure her.

He seemed gloomily preoccupied and distressed.

Breakfast was no sooner disposed of than he began to pace the floors, with frequent consultations of the time, and an occasionally muttered wish that Mr. Gray would make his appearance.

He forgot to visit his stables, kennels and poultry houses, as was his wont, and seemed but too plainly engrossed with a nervous hope for his father-in-law's return to precede the threatened one on the part of the sinister stranger from abroad.

At last he even sent Patrick to telegraph for the reason of Mr. Gray's delay, and urging him to hasten back to the manse.

But it was not to be.

At ten o'clock Edna, who had been hardly less nervously on the watch, came to announce that the unsavory visitor was approaching the house.

Edgar shot but one searching glance toward the figure that was sauntering up the avenue, and then seemed to brace himself as if for a momentous ordeal.

"Edna, my love," said he, gravely kissing his wife, "my interview with this man must be wholly in secret. I would not have it interrupted on any account, unless, perhaps—"

"Unless what, Edgar?"

He laughed in a fierce way.

"Unless violence should be attempted, on either side, we will say."

He then stepped to the piazza, received the man with a cold nod and a challenging air, and they retired together almost immediately into the library, a small room back of the reception parlor.

Edna was greatly excited, though doing her best to be calm.

She fluttered nervously about the great house, from kitchen to nursery, here, there and almost everywhere save the interdicted room, and finally fell to pacing the hall from end to end, with her eyes upon the library door, and straining her ears to catch the mere unintelligible murmur of the voices within.

"What could he have meant by violence being attempted, possibly?" she thought. "However, a wife's place should be by her husband, and at the first faint intimation of anything menacing, I shall interfere."

Her opportunity came.

At the end of an hour the voices in the library were suddenly raised, as if a dispute were culminating into a quarrel, and their purport became more or less audible.

"Your demand is barbarous!" Edgar's voice was first heard to exclaim, half in anger and half in expostulation. "Even half the amount would be a small fortune!"

"The deuce it would!" came the stranger's sarcastic response, also in a high key. "Well, I sha'n't abate my demand one shilling—mark me well, Mr. Willard. You ought to know me."

"You may go to the deuce, then, for it's not a shilling you shall have! Know you well? Yes; I should say so, and to my cost!"

"Easy, old *companero*, easy! Do you then doubt that you are in my power, young man?"

"I am not clear on that point. But at all events I'm not going to impoverish myself, to insure your silence."

"It wouldn't impoverish you. Ten thousand dollars isn't more than half your cash in bank, and your incomes are all the time coming in."

Ten thousand dollars! Edna caught her breath as she caught the words. Then, without diverting her attention from the voices, she made a slight signal, and Albert, the gigantic Swiss, made his appearance at the upper end of the hall, where she had kept him in reserve, and, with a stiff military bow, remained in readiness like a statue, with his huge leg-of-mutton fists in readiness, and a serviceable fierceness in his clear blue eyes.

"No matter!" Edgar's voice responded, peremptorily; "you sha'n't have it. It would be an injustice to my wife and child to yield to your demand."

"Oho! Say you so?"

"Yes, I do, curse you! And, moreover, even with such a sum yielded up to you, I would have no security against similar demands in the future."

"You would, I tell you! I would clear out, instanter."

The young man laughed bitterly.

"Of course, and remain away till you wanted more money! Do you think me such a fool as not to know the inevitable ruin of yielding to a blackmailer's initial demand?"

"You don't choose your words with much nicety."

"I never do when addressing a double-dyed villain."

"If red-dyed, too, a part of the stain would be found on yourself."

"You're a liar, and you know it!"

"Convince a judge and jury to that end—as you may be called on to do."

"Scoundrel, I defy you! Where are you going?"

"You spoke of your wife and child. The former, at all events, can understand a blunt charge, if even against her husband, and when I tell her of that idolized young gentleman's identity with—"

"Monster! you would not dare?"

"Wouldn't I? Put me to the test by continuing to refuse me my demand, and you shall see."

"I would kill you first!"

"Two can play at that game, Mr. Willard. Don't forget that I may have had a little more experience in the killing line than you, my boy."

There was a pause, during which Edna could hear her husband's nervous step pacing the room.

"Say half the amount you have named," he was heard to say at last, "and I shall yield to you."

The other was heard to laugh.

"Aha! and in the mean time you could put that old retired sleuth-hound, your respected father-in-law, on my track!"

"No; I would agree not to do so."

"I'm not to be tricked! I know Springsteel Steve of old. No more of his quality is mine, if you please."

"But couldn't I set him on your track in any event?"

"No; the ten thousand would heel me effectually, and I would be off on the blue water before he could spring a trap or turn his hand."

"You shall take half or none!"

"And if I refuse?"

"Then," seemingly with a long and determined breath, "you may do your worst."

"You're a fool! That would be ruin for you."

"You are mistaken. It would simply leave my intact fortune for my wife and child after my death—by my own hand!"

"This is lunacy!"

"Half or none!"

"Well," after a pause, "I agree."

"Sit down, then, while I write." And Edgar could be heard placing himself at his desk.

"Oh, I'll do standing. It doesn't take long to scratch off a check."

"There's more than that." And the harsh scraping of a quill pen, the only kind that Edgar would use, was heard.

"What do you mean—and what are you writing there?"

"A confession, relieving me of all the responsibility that you could hold over me in the future, and which you are to sign first. The signing shouldn't be one-sided, you see."

"I'll you to the deuce first!"

"All right! no confession, no check—and the signature to the former shall be witnessed, too. What do you say?"

"Go ahead! I'm agreed."

The scratching was resumed, but at this juncture Edna, after a last sign for the gardener to hold himself in readiness, quietly entered the library.

"Edgar, a wife has something to say when her husband is negotiating with a villain," said she, determinedly. "I protest against your giving your check to that man for one cent!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE BLACK-MAILER BAFFLED.

EDGAR WILLARD seemed to view his wife's intrusion, after the unexpectedness of it had passed, with an air of positive relief, and he threw down the pen, with a slight shrug of his shoulders as he rose from the desk.

Perez, however, had turned upon her like a baffled fiend, though he quickly recovered his sneering *sang froid*.

"So, a family affair?" he commented, with a repetition of his ironical bow-and-hand-on-heart mannerism of the preceding day. "Quite conjugal and domestic, I am sure."

Edna had quietly placed her hand in her husband's, and was standing calmly at his side.

"Don't be afraid, Edgar," said she, "for me to learn *anything* this man may have to say against you. It would make no difference whatever in my respect and love."

"No difference?" queried the black-mailer.

"Let madam reflect!"

"Albert is within call, my love," she went on, just as if there had been no interruption, "and, moreover, the dogs are unchained. The man can be kicked out of the house and off the grounds, you see, without your discommuting yourself in the least."

"Shall you give me the check, or shall you not?" roared Perez, turning upon Willard in a white rage.

"No!"

The baffled scoundrel turned almost green. Calm defiance is ever a home-thrust to the black-mailer's heart, for by his very use of the counter-stroke, whose *withholding* has constituted his sole sinews of war, he becomes powerless without remedy.

He obtains his revenge, it is true, but only in lieu of the gold on which he would have so greedily battened as the blood-price of his silence.

"Think!" hoarsely warned the villain.

"I have thought," returned Edgar, frightfully calm and pale. "You have your answer. Quite the house!"

Perez ground out a frightful oath.

"Not till I've had my revenge!" he snarled. "Your wife shall know all, curse you! though it send both of us to the gallows. She shall know that you—"

"She shall know nothing, at least from your lips, Red O'Meara!" said a stern voice, and its owner, Springsteel Steve, was perceived standing in the doorway with folded arms.

Edna had uttered a frightened exclamation on hearing the villain addressed by the name that aroused so many hideous memories, while the latter had started back with a muttered oath.

"Be not alarmed, my children," continued Mr. Gray, suavely addressing the young couple. "Though my hearing is specially keen, and I have consequently overheard most of this instructive conversation from the piazza, where I have been listening for fully half an hour, there shall be no unpleasant revelation, save as a strictly family affair. Come here, *you!*"

He beckoned to the adventurer as to a dog, and even like a dog, though a decidedly sulking and unruly one, the latter responded to the call.

"You've got nothing on me now, Springsteel," he growled, protestingly.

"You're a liar, I have!" was the contemptuously menacing reply. "How about the garroting cases in Harlem and up this way, of late?"

The scoundrel made an attempt to bluster, but with poor success.

"Quit this place, and return here or way your

tongue to the detriment of its proprietor at your peril! Begone!"

The adventurer slunk away without another word, even avoiding, though at a distance, the towering figure of the grinning Swiss, as if there were a hangman's suggestiveness in his glance.

He was gone, and the three were alone.

Edna sprung into her father's arms, while her husband bowed his head under the veteran detective's searching glance in mingled gratitude and embarrassment.

"Do I understand, sir," said the young husband, in a low voice, "that you overheard all?"

"Sufficient, if not all, my son," was the significant reply.

It was also sternly commiserative, if sternly reprobating, in its tone.

Mr. Gray stepped into the hall, in his swift, business-like way, saw that the tall Swiss had prudently vanished from his reserve post, and then re-entered the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

"Look up, Edgar," said he, kindly.

"I can't, sir," was the confused reply. "You would read my secret."

"I read it long ago."

"What?"

"Yes; though not before giving you my daughter."

"You have made a terrible mistake, though." And Mr. Gray, drawing Edna to his side, confronted the young man with something of a judicial air, for all that it was still kindly. "A terrible mistake, I mean, in not making a clean breast of it to this confiding woman, not only before making her your wife, Edgar, but before winning her heart. As for your keeping me out of your confidence, I do not blame you in the least; that was but natural."

Edgar did not speak in the slight pause that was afforded him, while Edna could only wonder, fear and wait.

"It only remains," continued the old detective, "to discover whether your mistake shall have lost you your wronged wife's respect, if not her love. As for its being irretrievable in its consequences to your personal safety, that I most certainly do not believe, or you should have heard from me ere this."

There was so much assuring hopefulness in the last words that Edgar looked up with a sort of brightening in his shamed and haggard face, but still without speaking.

"Now, sir," Mr. Gray went on, a little more peremptorily, "I would like to know why you have not confided to Edna from the first that you and Frank Harper are one and the same man."

Edna sprung from her father's side with a bewildered cry, and, pushing back the hair from her temples with trembling hands, gazed wildly at her husband.

He seemed to fairly wither and shrivel beneath her gaze, as if it scorched him, as the answer to Mr. Gray's question faltered from his lips:

"I was too cowardly—I feared to have her spurn me—I loved her so much."

So this was the revelation!

Much as she had shuddered for what might be coming, the remotest possibility of *this* had never for an instant entered her thoughts.

And yet—why had not she suspected just this, and nothing but this, before? A hundred linking circumstances, emotions, and theretofore puzzling contradictions now came flocking into her soul, and now the ruling emotion was still. Why had she been so blind? Why had not she suspected it before?

Then there was but one engrossing thought—pity, supreme, loving, womanly pity and solicitude for the miserable, stricken and humiliated partner of her life thus bowed into the dust before her.

She opened wide her glorious arms.

"My husband, my Edgar!" she cried. "My poor, suffering darling! thank God it is out at last—thank God no ghastly secret can ever sit, like a mean and cunning ghost, between us more!"

Then they were in each others arms, and the strong but stricken man was sobbing like a woman on the truer and stronger bosom of the wife—which is ever to all eternity the symbol of the self-sacrifice that dies not, of the love that is without limit and without surcease.

The once redoubtable Springsteel Steve turned away his head, and began to softly swear most scandalously to himself, in a manner highly suspicious of being but a cloak to a tendency to tears on his own part.

"You don't deserve such luck, my boy, but of course I knew she would act just as she has done," said he, when the three were once more under something like self-control. "Now let us face the main difficulty at issue, for, as a matter of course, we are not shut of O'Meara yet."

"What!" exclaimed Edna; "will the horrid man dare to come back to his blackmailing purpose after your counter-threat, father?"

"Doubtless. He is broke, with nothing else in the world to go on, and his sober second-thought must convince him that my counter-threat as to the garrotings was more or less of a bluff."

"But was it so?"

"Yes; though, with time given me, I might track the garrotings home to him, and such accomplished desperadoes as Red O'Meara are not apt to let counter-plots grow under their feet. However, I am in hopes that he will hesitate for a number of days, perhaps for weeks, before venturing here again."

"And he must feel that we are now in a measure prepared to offer a solid front to his designs."

"There is something in that, though it may only serve to sharpen his wits."

"He will come again!" said Edgar, moodily. "No doubt of that."

CHAPTER XXI.

EDGAR WILLARD'S STORY.

Mr. Gray motioned his son-in-law to a seat, and then took a chair directly in front of him, while Edna disposed of herself at her husband's side.

"Now," said the old detective, in his somewhat magisterial way, "let us see just where and how we stand."

The master of Willard Manse bowed his head submissively.

"I shall conceal nothing from you, sir," he responded, in a low voice, while his wife took one of his hands with a loving and supporting gesture.

"Have you really met O'Meara abroad in your exile?" demanded Mr. Gray.

"Never; though it is very likely that he has been in Uruguay in search of me."

"You did not remain in that country then?"

"Scarcely a month. It was the fear that he might seek me out that impelled me to continue my wanderings."

"How did you avoid him?"

"I reached Montevideo under an assumed Spanish name, and was enabled to support the character through my conversation with the Spanish tongue. In less than a month after my arrival, I joined a German scientific and emigrant commission, and penetrated with it far north into the southeastern Brazilian wilds.

"The commission fixed on a site for its proposed colony, on the Parnahiba River near its junction with the Parana, nine hundred miles north of Montevideo, and four hundred northwest of Rio de Janeiro—beyond the pampas, almost the unbroken primeval forest, the haunt of savage beasts and deadly serpents.

"Still not feeling secure, I pushed on, almost alone, to the gold and diamond districts between the headwaters of the Rio San Francisco and the slopes of the Brazilian Andes.

"There I remained undisturbed, part of the time as a tutor in a wealthy planter's family, and afterward as an overseer in the diamond washings.

"I was well paid, saved my money, and managed to keep myself fairly well-informed of home-affairs through occasional American newspapers, obtained from Rio at great expense, or through the kindness of new-made friends.

"I at last decided to come home, and take my chances. That is the story of my exile—my foreign experience."

"Was your chief motive in returning to obtain possession of your grandfather's estate?"

"It was not."

"What, then?"

"It was," with unaffected embarrassment, "to see once again the woman who has since become my wife."

Edna's grasp upon her husband's hand tightened, and her eyes slowly brimmed with the eloquent tears.

"What!" incredulously; "you had continued to love Edna through those years, after having met her but once?"

"I had. Her image in my heart had only brightened with time. And yet I had come almost to hate her, too."

"Ah! you had learned of her exposing the secret she had sworn to keep inviolate, and so deemed her false?"

"Yes; or rather it was the hope of having her seeming trustlessness explained that brought me home at last."

"Edgar, my boy, you are a fine fellow! But suppose your prospects had been disappointed, with regard to the estate, and you should still have found her blameless?"

"I should still have persevered to make her my wife, with the intention of carrying her back to Brazil with me. I had accumulated several thousand dollars, and could have made a happy, a *secure*, home for her down there in the tropics. I wish to God—with passionate bitterness—"it might have been so now!"

"Don't wish too hastily, young man! Let us see just how we stand here in Westchester county first. Edgar Willard, were you directly or indirectly concerned in the murder of—that man whose dead body rests in peace at last in White Plains Cemetery?"

Edna's heart was on her lips in suspense, but the answer, clear, distinct and solemn, was grateful and relieving as her own baby's kiss.

"I was not, as Heaven is my witness!"

Springsteel Steve slapped his knee with a demonstrativeness that he was not in the habit of displaying.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed; "prove but this to my satisfaction, and all shall yet go well with you and yours, my boy. Now for the story of your connection with the Bleak Hollow Mystery."

"I shall give it in as few words as are in my power," said Willard. "You have doubtless heard of my miserly grandfather's unnatural cruelty and injustice to my father, Martin Willard, who was his only son."

"I was but three years old when my poor father carried me into the hard old man's presence for the first and last time in my life, and yet the scene has remained fixed on my mind indelibly.

"It was a hard winter night. We had left my mother slowly dying of hardship and insufficient nourishment in our miserable, fireless attic home amid the slums of New York.

"My father, an incapable but persevering man, had been out of employment for weeks. Our last crust and our last ounce of fuel had been consumed. He told me afterward that he had obtained the wherewithal to pay our fares to White Plains by begging, with some discrimination, on the streets.

"This final appeal to my grandfather was our last hope, and it was without avail.

"The devilish old man drove us out of doors, penniless, crustless, and with revilings. Even then he had become the miserly recluse that he remained. The woman, Raw, was the sole outside witness of her relative's mercilessness and our shame.

"Let me say that the one thing I remember, or know, to her credit, is that she tried, and tried well, to intercede for us with the inhuman old wretch, even to the extent of receiving a blow from his fist for her pains.

"We dragged our way back to New York on foot and through deep snow, my father carrying me in his arms for the greater part of the weary way—eighteen miles to Harlem Bridge, six miles further to our *home*.

"My mother was already dying; in a brief period she was dead. Of pleurisy and prostration they called it; but really of starvation and a broken heart—the victim of my inhuman, money-glutted grandfather's cruelty, as much as if he had murdered her with his own hand.

"Soon after this, by a sort of irony of fortune, my father obtained employment.

"It was a poorly paid clerkship, but it was respectable, and it was enough for our humble needs.

"I was enabled to receive a fair common-school education, at the end of which, when I was sixteen, my father died.

"We were boarding at the time with a kindly Cuban family, who took a tender interest in me.

"But I repaid them badly. A situation had been obtained for me in a wholesale drug-house, where, being naturally not dull, and an exquisite penman, I might speedily have made my way.

"But I fell among evil associates and by twenty was a confirmed gambler and billiard expert. At the latter game I was enabled to make a sort of livelihood, after losing my business situation and being discarded by my Cuban friends by reason of my irregularities, though I do not think that my heart was ever thoroughly corrupted.

"However, I went from bad to worse. In an evil hour, after I had, for some freak, changed my name to Frank Harper, I fell in with the adventurer O'Meara.

"He soon acquired great influence over me, though never to the extent of my making him my full confidant.

"However, he led me into many dishonest practices, though hardly one that would have made me distinctly amenable to the laws, and I was rapidly becoming hardened and desperate.

"One day he read out aloud to me a newspaper paragraph in regard to my grandfather, whose reputed great wealth, together with his miserly habits, had already made him notorious, if not absolutely infamous, outside his immediate neighborhood.

"I think it compared him to a certain Duke of Brunswick, who had kept money and jewels to a vast amount on his premises, and under his constant personal watch. And it also referred to his mania for treasure-seeking, which would take him away from home periodically.

"The miser would be a good job for a bold cracksman," suggested O'Meara, cautiously. "One would only have to choose a time, when he is off on one of his secret treasure-hunts, to go through his old manse, as he calls it, and take all the swag worth having.

"I gave him no encouragement, and the subject was dropped by him, so far as I was concerned.

"But the paragraph had set me pondering, and my thoughts continued busy.

CHAPTER XXII.

EDGAR'S STORY CONCLUDED.

"I HAD come to hate my grandfather's very name, and the knowledge of the wrong he had

done my parents had never ceased to rankle in my moody nature.

"At last, persuading myself that I would only be appropriating what was in some measure my own by right, I resolved to take advantage of O'Meara's suggestion, but solely in my own interest.

"I slipped up to Purchase, engaged transient board at a convenient country tavern at Kensico, discovered that my grandfather was off on one of his periodical mysterious absences, and made nightly observations of the premises.

"Miss Raw, I discovered, did not sleep in the manse during its master's absence, but made two daily visits thither, morning and afternoon, probably to make sure that nothing had been disturbed.

"While making my observations, I kept myself for the greater part of the time secluded, under the pretense that I was a student engaged in some abstruse study requiring my most undivided attention for a few days; and, as I had brought no baggage with me, and paid my board daily in advance, the tavern people could not, or did not, suspect my character or intention.

"At last came the night on which I had decided to make my lonely burglarious attempt.

"Late in the afternoon I paid for the extras I had had at the tavern, bade the landlord good-by, and hurried away with the declared intention of catching a certain New York train.

"Dusk was beginning to fall when I found myself at the rear, or kitchen, door of the manse, at which point I had decided to break into the place.

"Though inexperienced as a cracksman, I had, much to my satisfaction, no difficulty in effecting an entrance.

"As I have said before, what I had observed on my one former visit to the house, when but a child, had remained faithfully photographed on my memory.

"My father and I had, strangely enough, been first admitted to the cruel old man's presence in his bedchamber, and it was thence, after our vain appeal to his charity, that he had driven us, with a tirade of abuse, down the stairs, and out into the storm.

"I was enabled to reach this room by a back-stair, and, in the lingering light that remained, looked around me curiously.

"But I had scarcely set foot in the chamber before I started back in mingled horror and amazement.

"My grandfather, it seemed, had not been away from home. There on the bed he lay, murdered, already lifeless, though not yet cold, and with blood on his white 'eard, from a deep knife-wound in the throat.

"I was bending, horrified, over the corpse when I was suddenly pounced upon from behind and overpowered.

"Then there was a laugh, and one of my assailants raised his mask, disclosing the features of my evil genius, O'Meara.

"Oho, but you're a sly dog, Harper!" he exclaimed. "What, you not only took my suggestion to heart, but here you are beforehand with us, and with a murder on your hands!"

"I protested, but he only shrugged his shoulders, laughed again, and pointed to the strong box and the safe in the wall, on both of which the men had evidently begun operating when the noise of my approach from below and the rear (they having previously entered by the front door) had caused a momentary cessation of their labors.

"The coincidence was so startling that I was well-nigh paralyzed, though I confess to no pity for the murdered form on the bed—of my own flesh and blood though it had been when in life.

"Come, what shall it be?" demanded O'Meara, after a sinister pause. "Shall you make a fourth of our number in the job, share and share alike, or shall you funk?"

"Suppose I refuse?" I inquired.

"You'll do that at your peril!" he replied. "We have only to fill our pockets, and then hand you over to justice as having been surprised, red-handed, by us in this murder."

"I was half-beside myself with horror, or I might have reflected upon the absurdity of his threat.

"Moreover, though armed, I saw that the trio would be too much for me in an encounter; and, as I have said, I felt no particle of regret for the fate that had overtaken the soulless miser.

"To make a long story short, I consented to cast in my lot with the criminals.

"There were nine thousand dollars in cash as the proceeds of the crime. An equal division was made. O'Meara's assistants were men of the neighborhood, uncle and nephew, calling themselves Swart and Timmons for the occasion, but whose real names were Black and Simmons.

"O'Meara had been haunting the neighborhood for a fortnight. He had manipulated these ignorant men, one a farmer, the other a sailor, to his ends, and it was at his suggestion that they adopted the precaution of addressing each other by the assumed names.

"They were more or less familiar with every

foot of ground in the vicinity; O'Meara's hired two-seated wagon was at the door, and it was at their suggestion that the particular spot in Bleak Hollow was chosen for the interment of the murdered old man. What followed you already know."

Edgar drew a long breath, as if the recital of his dreadful story had brought him some relief.

His wife was nestling all the closer to his side, but Mr. Gray's face was stern, and his forehead was wrinkled with thought.

"I do not hesitate to say that I hoped for you to come out even better than you have done, Edgar, according to your own showing," said he. "True, you were no murderer, but you were a robber, besides being an accessory after the fact in the graver crime. However, there is much, very much to extenuate your complicity, and the only problem is how to make the best of it. I shall, therefore, cross-examine you on some certain points."

"Go on, sir!" said the young husband submissively.

But here Edna interposed.

"Wait!" she cried. "Is it not better that my father should first be told of our experience with the double last evening?"

The old detective made an impatient movement.

"That double again!" he snorted.

"Oh, but do not refresh your incredulity to hastily, papa. You will have the testimony of a new witness to combat now, for Edgar saw the murdered man's double, as well as I, and heard it speak, too."

Mr. Gray turned a look of astonished inquiry upon his son-in-law.

"It is true, sir," said the latter, gravely; and he therefore recited the incident with the utmost simplicity.

The old detective listened with contracted brows, and it was more than evident that his hard-healed horse-sense was undergoing a series of mild shocks, to say the least.

"You are as little credulous as I, Edgar, of the supernatural," said he, after a long pause, "and, from what you tell me, I am bound to think there may be some substance at bottom of this seeming shadowiness. Tell me just what you think of this double, as you call it."

"If a double, it is a perfectly substantial one," was the prompt response. "It was simply my grandfather's self in flesh and blood, or his living, breathing, exact counterpart. I'd swear to it!"

Mr. Gray presently slapped his knee, and his long upper lip took on its shrewdest expression as his forehead partly cleared.

"By jingo! you must be right," he exclaimed. "There is no other explanation for it. Let us see; your grandfather couldn't have had a twin-brother, his exact image, I suppose, and the world at large be none the wiser?"

"Impossible!"

"Or improbable?"

"I can't imagine the possibility of such a thing, sir!"

"Neither can I exactly; but the domain of the Possible is very wide and so is that of the imagination, for that matter."

"True, but—"

"Hold on, my boy! Now, granting the possibility of the case—even supposing its probability—who would be most likely to set the question to rest?"

"Miss Raw."

"Ah, to be sure. The woman has sort of made herself scarce of late, I understand."

"She is living somewhere in White Plains, dress-making, I believe. My lawyer there has orders to pay her fifty dollars a month on my account."

"And very kindly—I may add exceptionally generous—of you, my boy!—perhaps better than the old petticoated grenadier deserves. However, we will drop this branch of the complication for the present."

"With all my heart, sir. I doubt if we can ever make head or tail of it."

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHADOW OR SUBSTANCE—WHICH?

SPRINGSTEEL STEVE continued his cross-examination of his son-in-law.

"Even at the last, I infer," said he, "that O'Meara was kept in ignorance of your true name and of your relationship with the miser?"

"He was; and there was no reason why he should have suspected anything of the sort."

"How then, think you, has he been able to identify you in your present name and position?"

"Chiefly by chance, I imagine. What exactly brought him back to this vicinity of his crime there is no telling, but it was certainly not in pursuit of me. He was the man whom Edna despaired eying me so fixedly from the edge of the wood, that time we were out driving together, and whom you will remember you ran back to get a glimpse of, but without success."

"All's clear, then. He must have recognized you on the instant then, by the merest chance,

as you say, and a few subsequent inquiries would have put him hot on your trail."

"A miserably-unlucky chance for me!" muttered Edgar, despondingly.

"Don't be too sure of that," said the detective, with a sudden geniality that was somewhat cheering, since his moods were always more or less significant of something substantial behind him. "It may be the clearing-up thunder shower."

"I'm going to believe so, anyway!" interposed Edna, hopefully.

"Now as to Swart-Black and Timmons-Simmons. Any idea what has become of them?"

"Yes," replied Willard. "I instituted extensive secret inquiries concerning them directly after my return from abroad."

"With success?"

"Yes. Black went to the Far West, was first a ranchman, then a cowboy, and finally a stage-robbler. He was killed, while trying to murder his keeper with a shoe-knife in the California State Prison, two years ago."

"And Simmons, the sailor?"

"A desperate sea-rover! I traced him to Shanghai, where he was in hospital with an intermittent fever, and expected to die at any hour."

"Let us hope that he didn't die."

"Why, father?" asked Edna.

"He might possibly be useful to us some day, if alive, kicking, and, still better, contrite. But my old head is already hard at work in a way that I cannot undertake to explain. Now, my dears, you both want to keep stiff upper lips, and place your trust in the old man—Springsteel Steve that was. For the present, I am very hungry, and luncheon ought to be served by this time. Come, my boy!"

And, as they quitted the library, he put his arm around his son-in-law with a simple gesture that went yet further than his words, in heartening the master of Willard Manse.

Soon after lunch, the old gentleman begged to have his favorite horse and buggy driven around for him, and carelessly announced before driving off that he might drop in on Miss Raw for a confidential chat.

"I shall probably be back in good season," he smilingly remarked, with his parting nod. "But don't be anxious if the dear woman should insist on my staying to tea."

Edna clasped her hands in an access of thankfulness.

"Oh, how fortunate that we have my father so earnestly enlisted in our cause!" she exclaimed.

The couple were looking after the disappearing equipage from the piazza.

"My cause, you mean!" said Edgar, gloomily. "You have committed no crime—have soiled your soul with no criminal associations! Yours is but the cruel stain that comes of contact with myself—the selfish, the cowardly wretch that so deliberately deluded you into his unworthy heart!"

"Don't! don't!" And, with a quivering lip, she looked beseechingly into his passion-torn, already—it seemed to her—fast-aging face.

"I can't help it!" he cried. "My God! can I ever look you in the eyes again as heretofore? I fear not—I fear not!"

She took him by the hand, keeping back her tears as best she might.

"Come!" said she, impressively. "That wild question shall be effectually answered, my husband, but not here."

As they were passing up the stairs they met the nurse descending, and a sign from her was a sufficient response to the young mother's inquiring glance.

Yes; the baby was asleep. As the fond parents hovered, with clasped hands, over the cradle, a dream-smile rippled over the sweet, cherub face, that was soon followed by an audible little laugh and crow from somewhere out of his mysterious little dreamland.

"Look me in the eyes now, my beloved!" whispered Edna. "Oh! with this lovely pledge uniting us forevermore, for better and for worse, in fortune or misfortune, have you not a better right to do so now, that all is known, than in our heretofore fool's paradise, when that serpent deception was between our hearts?"

His only answer was to clasp her to his unworthy heart, and for the second and last time in his manhood the unhappy Edgar Willard found relief in tears.

It was only after he had put up his horse in the village of White Plains that Mr. Gray remembered he had forgotten to obtain Miss Raw's address; but he was speedily set aright by his old friend, Sheriff Langley, whom he chanced upon soon after his arrival.

"Why don't you drop around to the manse occasionally, Jake?" inquired Gray, as they were separating. "They often ask about you, and wish you'd be more friendly."

The sheriff scratched his head, and looked somewhat embarrassed.

As his friend knew that he had well got over his disappointment regarding Edna's marriage to Willard, he was slightly mystified till Langley managed to say:

"Fact is, Springsteel, it ain't any fault of mine if I have appeared a little offish; but you

see—ur—there's some one else now as ain't such good friends with Mrs. Willard, and as might somehow object."

"Oh!" said Gray, alighting upon the significance of it all with his accustomed readiness. "What, old fellow! is it Miss Libby this time, and once again?"

The sheriff blushed and smiled.

"Good-luck, old man!" continued the old detective. "Since you're bound to be a marrying man, pray tell Miss Libby from me that Edna still remembers her with nothing but good-will, and it's her own fault if she keeps up the huff. There's enough of the dear, pretty creature for her to keep better-natured than she seems inclined to."

But Mr. Gray was destined to receive yet another reminder of the colossal young beauty before the day should wear away.

"Now what might that be, ma'm?" he genially inquired of Miss Raw, a little later. "Is it a patent flounced balloon, or a new gown for Barnum's pet giantess and fat gal, rolled into one?"

He was making himself familiarly at home in Miss Raw's village apartments, on the slenderest encouragement, and in a happy-go-lucky, here-I-am-again manner that was a matter of bewildering astonishment and resentment to no one so much as the saturnine and iron-visaged spinster herself.

"What do you want here, Mr. Superanimated Thief-Ketcher?" she snatched out, raspily, instead of paying any attention to his inquiry. "How many times air you goin' to let me ask that question without answerin' me, I want to know?"

In lieu of responding, the old fellow shrugged his shoulders good-humoredly, and, still with the look of intense curiosity on his shrewd face, got up from the one easy-chair of the apartment which he had unceremoniously appropriated.

Then, gingerly picking up the half-finished garment that had elicited his opening remark, he held it at arm's-length for an instant, and then burst into a sort of roar of triumph.

"I've got it!" he yelled. "It isn't a balloon at all, Miss Raw—no, nor a Barnum's fat gal's fit either—it's Miss Libby Webb's new dress, and I'm betting high on it! Ain't I right now, old girl?"

She tore it from his grasp, with a panther-like bound, her hard face blazing with fury.

"Yes, it is, you old fool!" she half-screamed; "and what is that to you? There! Now will you either tell me what you want and git out, or shall I hev to call a constable to hev you chucked out by the neck?"

"Why, my dear good woman!" in apparent surprised deprecation; "as the only constable within call is Sheriff Jake Langley himself, and he happens to be an old chum of mine—"

"Don't dear good woman me, you old fox!" she interrupted. "How dare you purtend to be fam'lar with me, when you don't skeerly know me, nohow? Get out of my house, sir!"

But the old detective had by this time coolly settled back in the lone easy-chair, and was returning her tigrish glare with a certain intelligence in his assumed idiocy of expression that was exerting a somewhat changed, if not an altogether calming effect upon the tempest he had aroused.

In her rage she fairly clutched him by the shoulder and shook him.

"Air you goin' to tell me what brings you here?" she hoarsely repeated.

"Why, certainly, Miss Raw!" with sudden affability.

"What is it, then?"

"To find out what you know about the murdered miser's twin brother, who amuses himself by masquerading as the other one's ghost!"

The woman turned pale and started back.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TAKING TEA WITH MISS RAW.

"THE murdered miser's twin brother!" repeated Miss Raw, finding voice with difficulty. "Why, man alive, you're crazier than a bedbug! There ain't sech a thing, an' there never was sech a thing!"

"I know better, ma'm," said the detective, coolly, and really with some growing confidence in his theory. "Come, now, my good woman! just tell me the whole secret of that mysterious twin brother, or—"

His pause was no less significant than his words.

But Miss Raw was a good deal of a thoroughbred in her way, and had by this time completely recovered from her surprise; which had, moreover, given her the advantage of enabling her to recover her equanimity.

She coolly reseated herself, placed her needle-work in order on an adjoining stand and putting her arms akimbo with her most martial and strategic *aplomb*, returned his gaze with sphinx-like imperturbability.

"Well, Mr. Thief-ketcher," she coldly demanded, "or—what?"

"You look here, my good woman," continued Springsteel, not certain but that he had met more than his match, "it won't do for you to brazen it out in this way."

"Or what?"

"You see, it has become vitally important to Mr. Edgar Willard that this question, as to the existence of a twin brother, should be settled at once."

"Or what?"

"Well, then, confound it, ma'm! how would you relish being suddenly deprived of the six hundred a year in monthly installments through the liberality of the present master of Willard Manse?"

Her countenance fell, but only for an instant.

"I wouldn't like it at all, mister," she composedly replied. "But eff I was obliged to lose it, unless I revelated something I don't know nothin' about, I reckon I'd hev to."

"I'll fill out that 'or' in another way, Miss Raw. Would you rather withhold this piece of information, which I am certain you possess, or—have your present pension made twelve hundred a year, instead of six, and secured to you for life?"

It was a glittering bait. Miss Raw had been starving-poor nearly all her wretched, unloved, hard-worked life, and even the fifty dollars a month had been the sudden realization of a financial beatitude beyond her wildest dreams. She was, moreover, moderately avaricious.

Still, after the first shock, she caught her breath, shook her head slowly, and was her iron self once more.

"I can't tell what I don't know, mister," was her reiterated response. "No, I couldn't do that, much as I'd like to, fur all the gold in Golconde. It would be simply *unpossible!*"

The detective coolly rose to go.

"What! you ain't a-goin', air ye?"

"Oh, yes! There isn't much use of my stayin' here, Miss Raw."

"No; but it's gettin' sort of long in the afternoon, and eff you ought be partial to a cup o' tea long with me, Mr. Gray—"

"Oh, thank you!" And the old detective was again in his seat as though a cup of tea were his chief end of existence.

But alas! the tea came and it went—and not noticeably good or strong tea either—and the visitor's shrewdest diplomacy was still vainly exerted to obtain from the martial spinster her faintest admission of knowledge with regard to the hoped-for twin.

"However, it is something to have been invited to tea with the old girl," grumbled Springsteel to himself, as he drove out of the village in the thickening dusk. "Perhaps that twelve hundred a year went in a little deeper than was apparent, though I had no authority from Edgar in making it."

While passing along the precipitous roadway in the vicinity of St. Mary's Lake, his horse suddenly shied, was then gripped by the head, there was a flash, and a bullet sped past the driver's ear.

An attack was being made by two men, one of whom held the horse, while the other was the immediate assailant.

To drop the lines and produce his revolver was the work of an instant with the old detective.

His main object, apart from his actual defense, was to identify his assailant.

But this was not possible, by reason of the darkness.

Before he could fire, a second flash followed the first, though not until his swift movement had again evaded the messenger of death.

Then a sand-club descended with momentarily paralyzing effect upon his right shoulder, the buggy was overturned by a powerful heave, and he was sent headlong down the steep bank, while the horse was heard to gallop off with the equipage, helter-skelter, up the road.

"Quick, Sam!" muttered a hoarse voice; "help me with this rock."

The discomfited Springsteel had just time to make himself small against the irregular face of the rocky slope down which he had plunged midway.

Then an enormous fragment, loosened from the upper edge, went bounding past his position, its wind almost knocking the breath out of him in its descent, and was heard to go into the lake with an astounding splash.

But by that time, or very soon after, the tough old gentleman had climbed the bank; *flash! bang!* spoke his revolver, and one of the ruffians, probably the one who had stopped the horse, was heard to utter a fierce oath, as if struck.

But some one was heard driving up the road, and, before Springsteel could fire again, or wholly recover from his shaking up, both men had jumped into an open field on the opposite side, and taken themselves off at the top of their speed.

The detective, without making any intimation to the passing team, which had been whipped up as though its driver had been seriously alarmed by the echoing shots, crouched out of sight, and patiently waited in the hope that his cowardly assailants might venture upon a return.

But he waited in vain.

"Deuce take it! what a fine chance lost," he muttered, while continuing on his way on foot, even sorrier from the sand-bag blow than from his tumble down the bank. "My life on it, that chief scoundrel was none other than O'Meara

himself, but of course there would be no way to prove it!"

In the mean time, the overturned buggy had righted of itself, and the runaway horse, after recovering from his fright, had jogged on stablyward, finally arriving unattended at the head of the manse driveway, much to the consternation of Edna and her husband.

But only a little later the genial old detective himself put in an appearance, having accepted a welcome lift on the part of a farmer who had chanced to be driving in the right direction.

"You must both be careful to keep as dumb as fish over the affair," was his caution while Edna was bathing his bruised shoulder with liniment. "If O'Meara was my principal assailant, as I haven't the least doubt, he mustn't be permitted to take undue alarm."

"You didn't see his companion's features either, I suppose?" inquired Edgar, who was standing by.

"No; but the other one addressed him as Sam."

"Ah! doubtless some chance-picked confederate."

Three or four days later, the old detective, while at luncheon, looked up from his New York newspaper with a satisfied little snort.

"My love," said he to his daughter, "you will oblige me by putting a few extra shirts and the like into my grip-sack with the least possible delay. I must be off by the next train."

Both Edna and Edgar looked up in no little surprise.

"Off to where, and why?" demanded the former.

"What is up?" inquired Edgar.

"This!" was the reply to the last question, and, marking a certain paragraph, Mr. Gray handed them the newspaper.

It was a general item of interest, alluding to a mysterious and picturesque old man, whose name was not known, but whose mania for discovering hidden piratical treasure had made him somewhat notorious along the coast in the neighborhood of certain fashionable resorts for a number of years past.

He was last seen near Long Branch, a few days previous, and had quitted that locality, it was supposed, for Fire Island.

"Aha!" said old Springsteel Steve, rubbing his hands; "you're both onto my little game, I see."

"I hope it will amount to something," observed Edgar, while Edna hurried away to make the gripsack ready.

"It isn't bound to, but there's some hope, my boy. In the mean time, you're to keep an odd eye on Miss Raw, and you shall be kept in telegraph communication with me, in case of emergencies."

CHAPTER XXV.

RED O'MEARA IN A NEW ROLE.

NOTHING of note happened at the manse for several days after the detective's departure, save that Miss Raw called, by special request, to fit a couple of new dresses for Edna.

The spinster seemed to appreciate both the profit and the honor, and manifested a becomingly subdued and mollified spirit in a general way.

"But she was as close-lipped to the young couple's advances, with regard to the grandfather's supposititious twin, as she had been to the detective's, and finally took herself off with her work without having vouchsafed a single shred of information, if, indeed, there was any to be afforded, which Edna on her part was much disposed to doubt.

However, a few mornings later, when they had returned from a horseback jaunt, the finished work was received back, and, written down at the bottom of the dressmaker's bill, which was pinned to the bundle, were the following words:

"How much would be settled on Miss R. for life, in consideration for telling something worth knowing?"

"Poor Miss Raw writes better than she talks," commented Edna, when looking over the bill on the viazza at her leisure. "A significant question that she asks here, Edgar, and there's not a misspelled word in the lines! But wait; it contrasts the wording of the bill oddly in that respect, and seems to be in a different handwriting too."

Willard hastily took the bill.

"The deuce!" he muttered, as soon as his eye had scanned the written inquiry. "How can he have got hold of the woman?"

Edna had remarked him turn pale.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That odd question, which otherwise we might place no little hope in!"

"Well?"

"It is in Red O'Meara's handwriting!"

She took the alarm at once.

"O'Meara's! Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. He has forgotten, or not cared, to disguise it; and I remember its peculiarities of old as well as I do my own."

"This is terrible!" exclaimed Edna, after a pause.

She was in her favorite porch-chair, but the fashion magazine she had intended looking over

was neglected in her lap, with the leaves uncut, and her whole attitude was expressive of her dejection, not to say of consternation.

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Edgar, with something of restored cheerfulness. "Let us not borrow trouble before it is upon us, my darling. It is one of your good father's prime maxims."

"Yes, yes; I know. But this is so evidently that scoundrel's renewed attempt upon you, and in such an unexpected form."

"True; but the masking of an attack necessarily implies the accompaniment of uncertainty, if not of fear."

"Oh, I hope so, I hope so!"

"Let us wait till the blade is bared before we fear its thrust. Come, think no more of it."

"I must, Edgar; I can't help it! How could that man have known of Miss Raw, besides divining our intentions regarding her?"

Edgar gave an astonished start.

"Look down the drive!" he exclaimed. "There is your answer!"

Edna obeyed, and with renewed consternation.

A stylish team was approaching, and behind it was—Miss Libby Webb, under the dashing escort of Mr. O'Meara!

A moment later and Miss Libby, after a timid overture, had folded Edna in her embrace, which seemed grander and more expansive than ever.

"Oh, my darling, how sweet, how splendid you are looking!" exclaimed the new arrival, with her customary gasping effusiveness. "Do you know, I heard, though at second hand from Shurff Langley, that you wouldn't disject being friends again, so I jest couldn't keep away another minute. How do you do, Mr. Willard? By the way, where's my pertineness? Let me interduce" (with much impressiveness) "Count Omeerando!"

The "count," who had duly fastened his team, and was viewing these endearments with an amused smile, bowed with a certain grandeur that could readily have passed muster as belonging to the *haut noblesse*.

He was fashionably dressed, just not overburdened with jewelry, bore himself finely, and gave not the slightest indication of ever having seen Willard Manse or its inmates before.

"He's a real nobleman, and he's boarding with us for the summer," whispered Miss Libby at the first opportunity. "You mustn't give it away on no account, dear Mrs. Willard, more especially to Shurff Jake, but the count's dead stuck on me already, and he has condescended to say that I put him in mind of the Empress of Rooshy."

"You have a fine old place here, Mr. Willard," the count had gravely observed to Edgar, without the slightest change of countenance. "Puts me in mind of my own villa in the Riviera."

"I am glad of that," was the young man's equally disengaged reply. "You are then of the Italian nobility, I presume?"

"Yes, rather. But," with a languid air, "dash the nobility. In such a paradise of fair women (an enthusiastic gesture in Miss Libby's direction) as free America, who would not be content with your democratic institutions?"

"We manage to content ourselves, count. But Italy is also noted for her fair women, I have heard."

A gesture of indifference was the response, followed by an adoring glance toward the superabundance of charms in the person of his fair companion, that was not lost upon her; after which the count bowed majestically to both ladies, as if in acknowledgment of the collective beauty of the country's feminine representatives at large.

It was merely a brief visit of ceremony, and, after declining a not particularly pressing invitation to remain for lunch, it was brought to an end.

"Oh, dear, I haven't seen the baby!" cried Miss Libby, at the last moment. "Do let me see the baby, Mrs. Willard?"

But that boon was denied her, by reason of the baby being asleep, and the visitors drove off.

Edna looked, with renewed anxiety in her inquiring glance, at her husband, who forthwith ordered a conveyance to be in readiness directly after luncheon.

"What shall you do, Edgar?" she asked.

"And where are you going?"

"Can't you guess, my love? In the first place to the telegraph station, to notify your father of these doings—he was at Long Beach at last accounts—and then to have an explanation with Miss Raw."

"Do let me go, too, Edgar?"

He hesitated.

"No danger threatens you personally," he objected, "and—somehow, though I don't know why, I dread to leave the baby alone."

"Alone? But his nurse would be with him, and here is the house full of servants, with Big Albert never out of sight. However, I have it!" eagerly. "Take the canopy-top Surrey, and bring baby and nurse along! They missed their drive yesterday, because of the shower, and the weather is delightful to-day."

He gave a rather reluctant consent, and the drive was so arranged.

The telegram was duly dispatched, with an immediate reply requested; and it came, from Long Beach in less than an hour, to the following effect:

"Be under no alarm, but be doubly on guard. May be with you at any hour, but am on a good scent." S. G."

They then made their descent upon Miss Raw, who seemed in nowise overawed at the impressively family nature of the visit, as it might be called, and scowled at the baby with evident disfavor, if not with positive animosity.

"I don't like young-'uns, an' ain't squeamish about sayin' so," was one of her opening remarks. "Least of all, heirs!" And she rung in her *h* with an unction that would have been a credit to Seven Dials.

They had already, with the exception of the nurse, helped themselves to seats in the little dressmaking-parlor.

"Indeed!" retorted Mrs. Willard. "Well, Miss Raw, Mary can then step out on your porch with baby, since he seems so objectionable, while my husband pays you your bill. And we can be careful about annoying you with our company in the future."

Miss Raw straightway began to draw in her horns, or to smooth down her false front, which was much the same thing.

"Oh, ma'm, I didn't mean no pertickler offense," she mumbled. "Leastwise—you kin let the baby stay off he'll promise not to spew or squack."

But, at a sign from Edna, Mary withdrew, notwithstanding that her crowing little charge seemed decidedly opposed to his elimination. Miss Raw received the amount of her bill, and the interview was fairly under way.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISS RAW NAMES HER TERMS.

EDGAR WILLARD lost no time in directing Miss Raw's attention to the significant words at the bottom of her bill.

For the first time in the visitors' experience, the woman seemed to lose her iron assurance, though it was but for a moment.

"That?" she stammered, after an awkward pause. "Oh, yes, that!"

"Suppose you explain it to us, Miss Raw," said Edgar, somewhat encouragingly.

Miss Raw was herself again.

"Oh, that!" she repeated, slowly. "Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Edgar, when I writ that I wasn't altogether decided-like in my own mind."

"You are not telling the truth at all, Miss Raw; for you didn't write it."

She gave him a quick glance, that was enough, and then said, sullenly:

"Well, Mr. Edgar, off you allow to know more about it than I do, what air you up to, anyway?"

"I am up to discovering the exact truth of the matter, and your demand afterward.

She drew a pair of old-fashioned mitts from her pocket, put them on, straightened herself bolt upright in her chair, stiff as a poker, and seemed to be expectant.

He went on, coldly:

"Those words were not only written, but also inspired, Miss Raw, by a man whom I chance to know something about—a Mr. O'Meara."

"Wrong, Mr. Edgar!" she snatched out, correctly: "by Count Omeerando, as high-toned a gent as I ever see."

"I begin to understand. And you doubtless made his acquaintance through Miss Libby Webb's introduction?"

"Yes, Mr. Edgar, I did."

"You must have exchanged some confidences with that man, for him to have ventured on such a written demand in your name."

"Wrong again, Mr. Edgar!" emphatically. "Seraphimer Raw swops secrets with no man on earth—no, nor with no woman nuther."

"That is well; suppose you explain."

"Mebbe I will, and mebbe I won't."

"I shouldn't like, Miss Raw, to remain you that you happen to be the recipient of my bounty—understand that I use the word bounty, because strictly correct—and shall only do so if actually compelled to."

"Oh, I'm no account, I suppose! I'm nothin' but a poor forlorn an' lone pauper woman, without no nat'r'l perfector!"

"I hope you won't make me impatient, Miss Raw."

She glared, but was docile.

"Well, the second time that swell came here he was alone. Miss Libby had told him, it seems, of my connection with the estate."

"With my bounty, you mean."

"All right, Mr. Edgar. 'I hear Mr. Willard pays you six hundred a year,' says he. 'That's my business, count,' says I. 'True enough,' says he. 'But do you know some secret what he'd like to know?' 'What I know I do know,' says I. Then he larfed. 'Look here, Miss Raw,' says he. 'You, I'm purty sure, know some secret what Mr. Edgar would like mighty to know. I on my part, hev a secret of his what he wouldn't hev known for a fortun'. Now, suppose we lump our claim ag'in' him, jest as eff

you was a-makin' it all yourself. He'd tumble to the dodge an' it'll jest be you actin' under my instructions, 'stead of me.'

"Well, well!" interposed Edgar, impatiently. "You finally struck hands with him and the compact was made? That is it, is it not?"

"Sort of that way, sir."

"Well, Miss Raw, you then virtually admit that you have a secret knowledge to dispose of?"

"I don't never admit nothin'."

"Do not trifle with me, woman, or it may be much the worse for you."

"Lor' bless you, Mr. Edgar! who's a-triflin'?"

"You do know something as to the existence or non-existence of a twin brother—as to my murdered grandfather having left behind a twin brother, in his own exact image, whom the world had never suspected or heard of before."

Miss Raw bristled up even straighter and more stiffly than before, if such were possible.

"Good Lord-a Massy, sir!" she exclaimed, in unaffected astonishment. "I don't purfess to know nothing of the sort. The ideahr!"

Both Edgar and Edna felt a secret sinking at heart.

Was it only to be proved that Springsteel Steve had been no less at fault than they; that the woman was simply O'Meara's dupe, with no secret at all in her possession worth the telling?

"Listen to me, Miss Raw," continued Willard, with renewed impressiveness. "You evidently know and have seen the strange personage who appears to be the exact image of my murdered grandfather?"

"I don't say as I hain't seen the—the inder-videoal," she reluctantly admitted.

"Is that personage a living, flesh-and-blood being, in your opinion, or a ghost—a spirit?"

"I don't take no stock in ghosts!" contemptuously. "That for sperrets!" And she so far relaxed her ramrod rigidity as to snap her fingers.

"Good! you then admit the substantiability of the strange person under consideration. You have also doubtless remarked his life-like resemblance to my deceased grandfather."

"No person could help remarkin' that."

"How then do you account for this person's extraordinary likeness to my deceased grandfather, unless on the theory that he is a twin-brother, kept apart from the knowledge of the world until recently?"

"I don't account for nothin'."

"Woman! who and what is this man?"

"I never said I would tell."

Both Edgar and Edna drew a long breath of relief. She *did* know the answer to the last question, as was quite evident, and the secret was for sale.

"We're getting down to hard-pan at last," Willard resumed, with much cheerfulness. "Miss Raw, you have something to sell that I am willing to buy. What is your price?"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Edgar," said Miss Raw, with wholly unexpected affability. "You ought to first understand just what I promise my secret to be worth. You've treated me like a white woman, an' I don't keer off I do do the square thing."

"Well, what do you promise the desired information shall be worth to me?"

"It will be worth jest this; It will take you right off, teetotally, out of that false-hearted scoundrel Count Omeerando's power, and render the future prosecution of *any* for Miser John Willard's murder an absolute impossibility!"

This was positively startling. The woman, in her impressiveness, had even managed to express herself in the uncorrupted vernacular. But this was as nothing compared to the import of her words.

Edna turned pale, while Willard was painfully aware of a cold sweat standing out on his forehead.

"How can you imagine me in that man's power?" he asked.

"I don't imagine it, and he didn't say you were. But I saw through the hypocritical skunk from the first, even when he thought me his instrument. I'd throw him over as I would a dog! When you deal with me, you deal with me *alone!*"

There had come a rough sincerity in Miss Raw's manner.

"Trust in her," whispered Edna.

Her husband nodded.

"Well, Miss Raw," he continued, "I take you at your word. As dealing with you *alone*, and provided your secret prove worth to me as much as you claim for it, what is your demand for its revelation?"

Miss Raw knitted her brows.

"What's the bull estate wu'th, at a cash valuation?" she asked.

Willard was again taken aback, but he replied after a pause:

"Four hundred thousand dollars, I have been told."

"Very well, Mr. Edgar," said Miss Raw, with a resumption of her cast-iron placidity, "you kin have my secret for jest two hundred thousand—an even half."

Edna felt like fainting, while her husband burst into a sort of hysterical laugh.

"You're crazy, Miss Raw!" he exclaimed; "you're not in earnest!"

But she wasn't crazy, she was in earnest, and all the talk to the contrary had no more effect upon her than water spraying upon adamant.

A fresh misfortune was in store for the young couple.

"Why, where is Mary, with the baby?" exclaimed Edna, on coming out on Miss Raw's cottage-porch. "What can have become of them?"

Sheriff Langley, who was conversing with another man a short distance away, was appealed to.

"Bless me, Mrs. Willard!" he exclaimed, after acknowledging the doulo greeting; "was it your child that the young woman had there on the porch a short time ago?"

"Yes, yes! what of them?"

"Why, a gentleman in a close carriage beckoned them to him a few minutes ago; then he playfully snatched the child from the woman's arms; pulled her in, too, when she leaned forward to protest; and then they were all driven away. I thought the gentleman the child's parent, and the whole thing a joke."

Edna uttered a piercing shriek.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CHILD KIDNAPPED.

"My child! my Willie!" screamed the unhappy mother. "He is gone—stolen!"

A few more explanations from the astounded Langley left no doubt as to both child and nurse having been surreptitiously spirited away.

Nor was there any doubt, from such rambling but fairly accurate description as he was enabled to give of the seemingly jocular gentleman in the close carriage, that O'Meara himself was the abductor.

Instantly there was a hue and cry. Even Miss Raw, who had followed her visitors out upon the cottage porch, was the picture of speechless indignation and dismay.

The sheriff darted off in the direction of his office, to put in motion such inquiry and pursuit as were at his disposal.

Edgar supported his all but frenzied wife back into the Surrey, which had been in waiting on the opposite side, which was the shadiest side of the street, and drove off to the railway and telegraph station like the wind, though with no definite idea as to what to do.

In a brief space of time the entire business portion of the community was agog with the story of the abduction, with such garnishments as busy rumor chose to furnish.

But child, nurse and abductor had disappeared, without leaving a trace, and that was the long and short of it.

It chanced to be fair week at White Plains, when the streets and outlying roads were unusually thronged with vehicles of every description, so that a close coach of the particular kind described by the sheriff would not have been noticed in any event, and the abductor had had a good ten minutes in which to organize his subsequent plan.

A train for New York that he might have taken was followed up by telegrams, but without result.

Swift messages were sent to Tarrytown and other points on both the Northern and the Hudson River roads, but with equally unsatisfactory returns.

The infant heir of Willard Manse had been successfully kidnapped.

An hour after the initial alarm, Sheriff Langley entered a private parlor in the Standard House where Edgar Willard, haggard and anxious, was awaiting news at the side of his prostrated wife.

Edna started up eagerly from the sofa on which she had sunk, but Mr. Langley could only shake his head hopelessly in reply to her wild stare of inquiry, and she subsided into her reclining posture with a broken little moan.

"Look here!" exclaimed the kind-hearted sheriff, half-desperately; "there's no use taking on this way. The child's bound to be recovered sooner or later, or the affair will be unprecedented in the history of Westchester county. That is all I've got to say. So do cheer up a bit, ma'm, and you, too, sir!"

"I'm doing the best I can, sir," replied Edgar, while Edna only looked up with the calmness of despair. "I agree with you perfectly—that our child must be sooner or later restored to us, and the kidnapping villain brought to justice. But in the interim—" He could say no more.

"A sudden thought strikes me," said Langley. "Are you sure of the nurse's honesty? Might she not have been in collusion with that hound?"

Edna shook her head.

"Mary had been with me long before Willie was born," she murmured. "She adored the child, and was vastly contented with her place."

"Still—however, you are sure this man you call O'Meara is the kidnapper?"

"No doubt of it," replied Willard, shortly. "The man is my bitter enemy, who has repeatedly endeavored to blackmail me—about the only enemy I have in the world."

"Oho! I wish I had paid more particular attention to his face. You are sure you've recog-

nized him from the description I have been able to give?"

"Yes; what you did recall of him would answer, though of course not to the letter. It was O'Meara—Red O'Meara! not a doubt of it."

"Perhaps I've met him in my official capacity. Any alias that you might know of?"

"He has probably worn as many names as suits of clothes. Litterly he has been posing as an Italian count, Count Omeerando, and it was only this morning that the scoundrel had the hardihood—"

But the sheriff had suddenly recoiled at the mention of the pseudonym, as if bitten by an adder, and was glaring wildly, with his eyes almost popping out of his head.

"Thunder and lightning!" he roared; "you don't mean to say that it's that hound? Oh, Lord! Why didn't I recognize him? How he must have monkeyed up his accursed face to deceive me!"

"You know him, then?"

"Know him? Why, the infernal hound is the one who cut me out with Libby Webb—with Big Libby, who had treated me downright mean once before!"

The unfortunate widower, who seemed to find it so hard to get a second bride, and whose cheery persistence was doubtless worthy of better success, bowed his head in mingled embarrassment, fury and chagrin.

"It is the same scoundrel," said Edgar. "Miss Libby was with him when he called at the manse this morning. That was the first intimation I had of his patent of nobility and of his boarding at the Webbs."

"Know him!" reiterated Langley, through his grinding teeth. "Why, I—I might have come to terms with Libby last Wednesday but for the sudden interloping of this—Oh, woman! thy name is frailty! However, I'll get even with him yet! Ah, my friends! trust in me to work out your revenge, and to effect the restoration of your child. I'm a regular sleuth-hound, with a starved wolf's appetite, when I get fairly on the war-path, and now—"

Under happier circumstances his hearers might well have smiled at the incongruous coupling of Miss Libby's name with 'frailty,' even in the metaphor of apostrophe. But as it was, the good man's rage and earnestness were altogether too real to be anything but serious.

He was hurrying out of the room when he accidentally rushed into the arms of a man who was entering it with a brisk, decided step, and simultaneously Edna started up with a cry of temporary relief.

It was her father.

She sprang to her feet to rush into his arms, ere the old detective had quite finished shaking hands with the sheriff.

But Edgar could only look upon Mr. Gray with amazement.

"Why, how is it possible you are here?" he exclaimed. "It is now but six hours in the evening, scarcely five hours since we received your return telegram from Long Beach!"

"Which isn't quite in Europe, my boy, as I hope you'll admit," replied Springsteel, already busy calming his daughter's renewed sobs.

"Not quite, but—you still must have started for home almost instantly after receiving our dispatch."

"So I did, my boy—circumstances prompted promptness, so to speak—I was uncommonly lucky in railroad and ferry-boat connections, and here I am!"

"You know of our fresh misfortune?"

"Gad! it isn't for lack of the whole village telling me about it between this and the station, if I don't. Come!"

"We shall do just as you advise, sir."

"All right. Home at once, then! Edna must not remain here another ten minutes."

"Oh, father," Edna sobbed; "home without my boy, my Willie?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Shall you get him back by moping and sobbing here? Are you so crazy as to dream that real harm can come to him, when still in Mary's care, just as if there were no feeding-bottles outside the Manse?"

"But, father—"

"But me no buts! Come right along as I order. I fancy we can safely trust to Jake Langley to keep on looking for the kid in our absence."

"Can't you, though?" cried the sheriff. "Oh, depend upon that, my friends! And when I do get my hooks on that cowardly, interloping, child-stealing Count Omeerando—"

He finished the sentence in a species of ecstatic war-dance of rage, equally expressive, if somewhat inarticulate, which lasted until he had seen them in the Surrey, and fairly driving away.

Springsteel Steve had assumed the lines, while Edgar was doing his best to comfort his wife.

"Ah, a good idea," suddenly muttered the old detective to himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BAFFLING SURPRISE.

THERE was still a good deal of daylight remaining when Willard remarked that his father-in-law was somewhat deviating from the most direct route back to the old manse.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Where else than to the Webbs?" was the response. "Could we flush a new inquiry as to that rascally O'Meara's movements prior to the kidnapping in a better spot, I should like to know?"

"Excellent!" cried Edgar. "It would never have occurred to me, at least so suddenly."

"Well, to tell the truth, it isn't such an aged idea in my own mind," admitted Gray.

Even Edna, who had somewhat regained her desperate calmness, started up, somewhat brightened.

"They will know something that can put us on the villain's track," she exclaimed, clutching her hands. "Yes, yes; it will be strange if they cannot tell us *something!*"

"It may open their eyes, at all events, as to the mixed character of their noble boarder," said the detective, grimly. "Poor Libby! I'm afraid her marriage-cake is still in the dough, though she's big enough to stand it, to be sure."

"You, I presume," observed Edgar, after a pause, "are equally certain with us that O'Meara alone has done the kidnapping?"

"Of course, of course! What the deuce! who else could be interested in such a fiend's plot?"

"But what could exactly be his interest and intention?"

"What! isn't it patent to you?"

"Not exactly."

"Why, he's weakening on the first racket—your firmness was bidding fair to freeze him out, and it became necessary for him to have a fresh hold on you. Plain as the nose on your face, my boy!"

"Still, his calling on us with Miss Libby this morning didn't exactly look like his weakening."

"Didn't it? It looks to me like just nothing else. It was his last feeler on the old dodge, before risking this new and dastardly one. But here we are."

They drew up before Farmer Webb's well-remembered gate with a clatter that was suggestive of both haste and business.

Then every one of the trio experienced a shock of surprise—of the absolutely unlooked-for.

Prominent among the family group who came out from the piazza to greet their arrival was—Count Omeerando!

He was putting on his most languid and aristocratic saunter, doubtless to the covert admiration of Miss Libby, who was at his side, and nothing could have surpassed the easy *nonchalance* of the cigarette between his white teeth.

"Ah!" he drawled; "our acquaintances of this morning. This is an unexpected pleasure."

And he even shot a glance at the detective himself, in which there was not a particle of recognition.

But Edna was already out of the wagon, and the next instant, to the astonishment of her husband and father no less than the others, she was upon the adventurer, with a frenzied bound, carriage-whip in hand.

"My child, scoundrel, my child!" she screamed. "How have you dared steal my baby away from me? What have you done with him? Quick! answer me, or I will kill you!"

She had clutched him by the throat, to the ruination of his shirt-collar and scarf, and was frantically waving the whip over his astonished head.

Her father and husband, who had by this time alighted, hastened to draw her away from the fellow, and Edgar sternly confronted him.

"O'Meara!" he exclaimed, pallid with suppressed fury; "there can be no doubt that you were the abductor of our child and his nurse in White Plains an hour or more ago. You were as good as identified by Sheriff Langley."

"Good God!" cried the man, with a general aspect of amazement that it seemed impossible to be feigned; "what are you raving about? I am an abductor—a child-stealer, and a nurse-stealer, into the bargain. You're crazy, the whole set of you—downright crazy!"

"Yes, you—you! Your life isn't worth a minute's purchase, should you try me too far! It might be"—hissed in an undertone, and between the teeth—"a simplification of things, after all! You understand."

"But, man alive! why—Stole your child, you say, I, and in White Plains an hour or so ago?"

"Yes, yes!"

The pseudo-nobleman shrugged his shoulders, and drew a long breath of mock relief, while making an appealing gesture to Miss Libby and her father and mother, who had come down out of the piazza with him.

"An alibi. I have an alibi," said he, bursting into a laugh. "But this is too outlandish. Why, Heaven save your intellects, man! I haven't been absent from this house for five minutes since our midday meal."

"It is true," interposed Miss Libby, by this time recovered from her individual astonishment. "His lordship was indisposed in his own room till a short time ago, and hasn't absented himself from the house the whole afternoon."

Her father and mother confirmed the substance of this rather original statement, though of course there was no direct testimony as to

'his lordship' having remained in his room after betaking himself to its seclusion.

But enough had been explained to make it generally appear that a grave mistake had been made, and the manse party once more got into their vehicle, after Mr. Gray had affably vouchsafed a few words as to the nature of the misfortune that had brought it about.

Farmer and Mrs. Webb manifested instant sympathy with the young couple, especially with Edna, in their bereavement; while the count maintained a stiffly distant demeanor, in which he was aped by Miss Libby with a grotesqueness that would have been highly entertaining under less painful circumstances.

Like most comely young women, ignorant of the art of dress, she was resplendent in a new summer-gown (probably the one criticised at Miss Raw's by the detective), that emphasized her defects and detracted from her personal advantages. Its fluffiness of material and superabundance of trimmings enhanced the effect of her oversize to a comical degree, and the worst of it was that her pose in the gown was inordinately self-complacent as though she were convinced of just the opposite effect having been attained.

Miss Libby was, moreover, unwilling that Edna should drive off without having a taste of the quality she imagined to be reflected by her own person from her high-born companion.

"Dear Mrs. Willard!" she said, advancing to the side of the Surrey with a labored glide-droop-and-haunch movement that was meant for an impressively majestic sweep; "no one kin have more complicitude over your retrieval than me. But surely you're not going to skip off with making a depolooy to our consulted guest, Count Omeerando?"

Notwithstanding that his countship suddenly stuffed his handkerchief in his mouth, as if threatened with an apoplectic fit, Edna managed to get the scene over by murmuring out what might have been construed into an apology, and the hapless visitors drove away.

"I'm sorry you permitted your temper to master you, my poor dear," said Edgar after a long pause, though with no reproof in his tone.

"So am I," was the simple reply. "But I couldn't help it."

"No harm was done," growled out the old detective. "The gust has rather done her good than otherwise, and the guilty scoundrel will yet make sign."

"What!" exclaimed Edgar, in a tone of relief; "you also continue to hold O'Meara guilty of the outrage?"

"More than ever."

"Then you do not regard the alleged *alibi* problem?"

"Alibi fiddlesticks! What was to prevent him from hoodwinking the Webbs at pleasure by remaining absent from his room the greater portion of the time he pretended to be in it? That would have afforded time enough for the kidnapping trick and more than enough for such a consummate plotter."

"But, in that case, he must have transferred the custody of his captives to somebody else."

"Of course he would have had a confederate."

"Don't you think the circumstance of the nurse, who is a robust and sensible girl, being pulled into the close coach after the baby, without making a noticeable struggle or outcry, as little short of incredible?"

"Yes; though it still might have been managed."

"But how?"

"I'll tell you better when I know. But chloroform, combined with boldness, muscularity and cleverness, might have effected it. But, as I've already said, O'Meara will show his new hand, and that before long, depend on it."

This prediction was speedily verified.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN INTERRUPTED STORY.

NOTWITHSTANDING the agony of suspense the young couple continued to endure, they tried to be responsive, directly after dinner, to Springsteel Steve's earnest request that they should listen to the story of his unsuccessful quest of the treasure-hunter.

"I want you to force yourselves to listen to what I have to say, my dears," said he. "It will not only prove interesting, but may divert your thoughts somewhat, in however trifling a degree, from this misfortune, which both of you must see cannot in the least be mended by any personal action on the part of either of you. Sheriff Jake is awake in your best interests, and don't you forget, my friends, that he is a whole double team, with a tandem attachment, when fairly started."

Rain had begun to fall, and the consultation took place of necessity within doors, notwithstanding that the air was sultry and close.

But it was destined to other interruptions than those of the storm, which was presently abroad in all its fury.

In the first place, the ex-detective had just got well started in his narrative when a message came from Langley.

Though merely to the effect that no definite

trace had yet been discovered, it was in a generally hopeful vein, and concluded with a promise to send additional word once every hour during the night.

The next interruption was when the housemaid brought a suspicious looking missive, sealed in a thick muslin-lined envelope, and address "Mr. Edgar Willard," which she said had just been handed in at the kitchen door by a rough-looking muffled-up man, who had then at once hurried away amid the beating storm.

The girl was dismissed and then Mr. Gray looked up with a keenness of interest that was something of a consolation for the interruption.

"Aha!" he muttered, with his eyes on the letter in his son-in-law's hands, "the sign from the rascal as I predicted; I'm betting on it!"

Edgar broke the envelope, and scanned its contents, with a brow of gloom.

"You are right, sir!" he exclaimed. "Was there ever such unheard-of impudence? It is positively so vast as to be mysterious."

Edna tremblingly read over her father's shoulder the missive—a scrawl in pencil—now in his hands.

It was as follows:

"Of course, I am the kidnapper, in spite of my bluffing it out at the Webbs'. Now what are you going to do about it? Neither child nor nurse shall be suffered to come to any injury, *as yet*. But they are safely at my orders, in an asylum that even Springsteel Steve, old fox as he is, will exert himself in vain to discover; and it is in my power to have the kid either abused or destroyed by a mere word at any hour. This is the second string to my bow, and should it fail me, I shall at once fall back on my original threat, and denounce you publicly as the murderer of Miser John Willard, even though my own skin shall not wholly escape."

"But it is not likely to fail me, and my own safety is assured."

"I have changed my terms, which are now as follows: Twenty thousand in cash, accompanied by your written declaration, over your signature, and witnessed by your wife and father-in-law (all in the family, you see,) to the effect that I, Lawrence O'Meara, am, to the best of your knowledge and belief, totally innocent of the so-called Bleak Hollow Crime, by which said John Willard came to his death.

"Have the money and declaration ready for delivery into my hands (at such time and place as you shall presently be advised on by me) within one week from this present 18th day of October 188—, or two culminating misfortunes shall be hurled unrelentingly upon you, the one preceding the other in the following order:

"First, you shall receive indubitable proof that your missing son and heir is forever beyond recovery, through the instrumentality of death.

"Second, you will be under arrest, at my formal instance, charged with the sole, unassisted murder of your grandfather, John Willard, of Willard Manse, five years ago.

"A word to the wise is sufficient. This is the last communication you will receive in writing from me. You shall next hear from me only to satisfy my demand in full, or to feel the fulfillment of my threat.

"YOU KNOW WHO."

Edna lifted up a blanched and horrified face from the perusal of this cold-blooded and appalling epistle.

"This scrawl can be used against him," she faltered. "He acknowledges himself as the kidnapper of my child! Let the fiend be arrested at once."

The ex-detective reluctantly shook his head.

"What!" she exclaimed, wildly. "Shall he not be convicted out of his own writing—out of his self-accusation?"

"Impossible!"

"Oh, my father, do not say that! Consider my anguish, my wrongs! Do not say that it is impossible!"

"I must say so! Do you think the villain would have thus put his written demand in our hands, if it had involved danger to himself?"

"But why—why?"

"It is unsigned; even the handwriting is purposely a but half-legible scrawl. He could deny the whole thing, even stigmatize it as a foul plot designed to injure him, and laugh at us for our pains."

"It is true," assented Edgar, gloomily. "He has not been such a fool as to give himself away."

"But my baby—he will kill my baby!"

"Nonsense!" cried the old detective. "He neither will nor can do anything of the sort. The little dumpling shall be restored to you in short order."

"Ah, but in the mean time—in the mean time?"

And the unhappy mother stretched out her hands, with an indescribable pathos in their suggestion.

"My daughter, you *must* have patience and bear up! Do you forget that Mary, the good nurse, is still with the child?"

Patience, indeed, and under such circumstances!

"Patience? Patience scorned of devils! This is truth, the poet sings, That a woman's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things."

Edna burst into a wild laugh.

"Mary, the good and faithful nurse, indeed!" she wailed. "Did she not once already permit the child to be snatched out of her hands? Oh, my baby—my baby!"

Stricken nature could do no more, and she was already in hysterics.

Willard at once carried his wife to her room, summoning the housemaid and others of the women to her assistance, and the physician was sent for without further delay.

It was only late at night, and after the unhappy mother had been thrown into temporary unconsciousness of her misery, that the wretched husband and his father-in-law again seated themselves in the library, with a last effort to shake off their dejection of spirit.

"It is hardly any use," said the old detective, helping himself with unaccustomed liberality out of the decanter that had been set between them. "I had something of a story to tell, but the gist of it is all knocked out of me. However," dubiously, "it wasn't much of a story, after all."

Edgar also helped himself to the spirits, with a commendably determined effort to shake off his gloom.

"I am certain that I shall be interested in it, though," said he. "Come, father-in-law, you sha'n't be interrupted again. You must, at least, have got a glimpse of the dead man's double in your wanderings, so that your incredulity in his existence is permanently shaken by this time."

"No, I didn't, and that is the marvel of it all, my son."

"What! not even saw him?"

"No; but my credulity was all right, you must remember, before I started on my wild-goose chase—that is, as to the existence of the man-double, mind you, the twin business, you know."

"Well, let me have the story."

CHAPTER XXX.

WAITING.

"As I said before," said Springsteel Steve, "there isn't much of a story, my boy. I somehow thought there was, but there isn't."

"What substance can there be to the story of a search that ends in nothing, or in bald information as to what may be expected in the future?

"Since I started out I have been on the mysterious treasure-hunter's track at seven different seaside resorts, without clapping eyes on him.

"Sometimes he would have been seen at this place only the night before; then at that place he would have made cautious inquiries of the hotel people as to the general trend of the coast;

and then again, he would have just taken passage in some fishing sloop for some out-of-the-way beach away off among the beating waves, where I only followed him to find that he had skipped away, after prospecting with his divining-rod, and digging up the sand a bit.

"At last I sort of weakened in my actual pursuit, and took to gathering up such information as I could obtain of the crank's characteristics.

"Boiled down and filtered out, my boy, they amount to just this:

"No matter where or how he flits along the seaboard, there is this governing eccentricity, or method in his madness, as we'll say.

"He always suddenly disappears from his coastwise search at irregular intervals, and is seen or heard of no more.

"Do you know the conclusion that I at last tumbled to? It was this:

"The treasure-seeking crank is invariably dragged back to this Bleak Hollow vicinity, as by an irresistible magnet."

"Well?" inquired Willard, after a long pause.

"Well, I concluded it was better to lie in wait for him here than to continue chasing along the ocean beaches in his uncertain track.

"Directly after replying to your telegram today, at Long Beach, though I had a notion of following my *ignis fatuus* along up toward Newport, something told me I had better be heading back for the manse. I did so, my boy, and here I am."

"Thank God it is so!" exclaimed Willard, earnestly. "You at last thoroughly believe in our double, then, and think you can succeed in cornering him?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Who and what do you take him for?"

"A half-crazy twin brother of your dead grandfather. His very existence might have been a closely-guarded family secret, you know, only allowed to escape at last through the death of your grandfather, who had doubtless been the poor devil's jailer for a lifetime, without any one suspecting the secret. Such strange things have come to light before."

"True. But how could the crazy twin—with out money and deprived of the close watch to which he had perhaps been accustomed from infancy—have successfully masqueraded in this way for the past five years, while preserving his own secret? And that, too, while being thoroughly cognizant of my grandfather's violent death and subsequent burial?"

"Ask me something easier, my boy. The future can alone explain that." And then, after a moment's pause, Springsteel exclaimed: "By Jupiter! it's a strange thought that just occurs to me."

"What is it?"

"Might not the double be also the murderer?" Willard stared.

"It is a wild supposition, I know," continued the detective, "but not absolutely preposterous.

"We will say that the crazy twin has been kept in close and secret confinement by his saner brother from infancy—or say by their father, until he could transmit the secret charge to your grandfather.

"He has this treasure-seeking freak as his ruling idiosyncrasy. So had your grandfather, for that matter, as we know. But it probably exists in the lunatic in a more objectionable form, that is for the most part restrained.

"Well, on that very eventful evening of five years ago, we will say that our lunatic twin slips out of his confinement, and enters the adjoining bedroom.

"Perhaps he is not so crazy as he might be. At all events, there is an unexpected illumination. His counterpart jailer, the miser twin (secretly returned from one of his own treasure-seeking freaks), lies sleeping and helpless before him.

"The lunatic double at once murders his saner prototype, chuckles over his good-luck, grabs what money he can, and disappears, to alternately follow out his harmless mania, and haunt the grounds here to his heart's content; his very existence unsuspected; and O'Meara and his two pals chance to effect their felonious entrance shortly after, only to find their miser already murdered to their hands.

"There you are, my boy! What do you think of it?"

"Nothing whatever," was the prompt rejoinder. "The theory is too utterly fantastical and far-fetched to be worth a moment's thought.

"Well, it is a little *outré* or *bizarre*, as a Frenchman might say," admitted the other, with his dry little laugh. "But there must be a twin in the case, and a live one, too, or there is no accounting for the dead man's double."

"Yes, that much is certain. Even Miss Raw admits it at last."

"What! But, by the way, I am just reminded that you haven't yet had the opportunity to tell me the result of the interview with that woman."

Edgar did so now.

"What do you think of it all?" he asked, when he had finished.

"Wait a little," said the detective, who had listened to the account with intense interest. "A deep woman and an odd one, my son! But she let out more to you two than she did to me. I am trying to analyze her."

"But you can't doubt, I suppose, that she's a regular vulture—a cormorant of grasping avaciousness?"

"I do doubt that."

"What! when she coolly demanded of me one-half the estate, as the price of her safeguard secret?"

"Yes; it may have been a bluff."

"A bluff?"

"Certainly. At all events, you won't deny her private contempt and dislike for O'Meara, who doubtless even at this moment believes her in some degree his tool?"

"No; I can't deny that."

"By the way, did that seem sincere in the woman?"

"Perfectly so. What ever else she may be, Miss Raw is not much of a hypocrite."

"I am glad to have you own that."

"Why?"

"Well, there is something to be hoped from her."

Willard shook his head.

"I am afraid not," said he. "The woman seems to be made of iron."

"A good metal, my boy, especially when tempered. You know the old saying, True as steel."

"Yes, true to itself. The idea of Miss Raw being true or generous in any other sense seems to me particularly absurd."

"Well, we can only wait. She, at all events, hasn't limited you to one week's time, as O'Meara has."

"That is your advice, then? Simply to wait?"

"Yes; for the present."

"Still, we might as well consider possibilities beforehand."

"By all means; nothing like being prepared."

"Well, the bare idea of yielding to Miss Raw's demand is not to be thought of for an instant?"

"Certainly not."

"Nor to O'Meara's demand?"

"Still less than to hers."

Willard drew a long breath.

"We'll imagine the worst," said he. "Suppose I am at last arrested on O'Meara's accusation?"

"Good! you have then one undeviating course to pursue, until advised to the contrary by me."

"What is it?"

"To preserve absolute silence, even as to denial of your guilt."

"What!"

"Edgar, I swear to you that not only your safety, but your speedy acquittal of the charge, shall follow your strict observance of this ad-

vice! Promise me to follow it, in the event of your arrest."

After an inward struggle, the required promise was given.

"Now we're all right," said the old detective, again helping himself from the decanter, after filling his companion's glass. "And don't imagine that I'm to be idle during this waiting game. My boy, here's to a fortunate outcome from all your complications! And after this we will talk of something else."

The young man touched glasses with the shrewd old fellow, and strove hard to appear more at his ease.

They remained sitting up all night to receive the hourly messages from Sheriff Langley, with regard to the search for the kidnapped nurse and child; which came regularly, according to promise, but were devoid of encouragement.

Not long after daybreak, however, an unlooked-for sensation was afforded from another quarter.

The storm had just cleared away, and all nature was dripping after her bath of rain, when a furiously driven horse and carriage was heard to come to a sudden halt at the head of the drive.

"Hallo!" shouted a well-remembered voice, that brought both watchers out on the front piazza in short order.

The visitor was Farmer Webb, his horse and wheels splashed with mud, and he himself in an unwonted state of excitement.

"Glad to find some one stirrin'!" he called out. "Hain't neither of you seen nothin' of our Libby an' that foreign galoot, Count Omeerando, hev you?"

"Not a sign," Mr. Gray took it on himself to answer. "What's up, farmer?"

"They've sloped, gol-darn 'em!"

"What, eloped?"

"Yes; an' with every dollar of my money they could lay their hands on! Reckon I'll see Shurff Jake. Git up!"

And away he drove, leaving them to guess at the particulars.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BEFORE-BREAKFAST DRIVE.

"LET'S take a before-breakfast drive," suggested Springsteel Steve, after he and his son-in-law had stared at each other in silence after the farmer's astonishing announcement. "This news is too good to keep in the house!"

Edgar ascertained that Edna was still sleeping soundly, and the two men were soon on the roads, feeling as well as could be expected after so watchful a night.

"This is strange news we have just heard," said the younger man. "But why do you find it such particularly good news?"

"Why, can't you see? In the first place, odd jobs at garroting must be petering out with O'Meara—in other words, he must already be in desperate need of money, not to be able to wait out even the week of grace he has given for your decision."

"But how will he have improved his own position for future operations against me by robbing old Webb of his money, no less than his daughter?"

"It will be made to appear that Miss Libby has done the robbing, depend on it."

"Perhaps so."

"Oh, it is certain! otherwise O'Meara would have put himself into a bad box, which we know he wouldn't be likely to do. The money loss is what the farmer would not forgive, while perhaps secretly glad of Libby being off his hands."

"A heavy weight on them, to be sure, since the foolish girl was no doubt extravagant in her demand. Still, I can't fathom O'Meara's object in the new role."

"I can. The fellow has his passions, 'and Libby is an uncommonly fine-looking woman."

"Enough of her, too! But do you imagine they will be back to the farm-house?"

"In two or three days. The five or six hundred dollars, that O'Meara has induced his companion to steal, will last him about that long."

"It is a queer complication, anyway. Are you driving to White Plains?"

"Yes; we might as well take our spin in that direction as elsewhere; and something of additional interest may turn up."

Something of additional interest did turn up; for, early as was the hour on the arrival in White Plains, they found Farmer Webb holding forth on the nature of his wrongs to a group of gaping and grinning listeners at one side of the main street, prominent among whom was the sheriff.

The farmer drove off as the new-comers approached, and then Langley joined the latter.

"No satisfactory response as yet with regard to the child and nurse!" he sorrowfully announced. "But have you heard about Libby and the scoundrel?"

The old detective nodded.

"Where is Webb off to now?" he asked.

"To the Hudson River road, in quest of his own stolen cherub," responded Langley, with an angry laugh. "Who would have expected that great gawky, lumbering female to make such a thundering guy of herself?"

"Almost any one that knew her, I should say."

"Why, it's like running off with a mountain or a beer-vat, and I wish the fraud joy of his bargain!" Langley's tender recollections were things of the past, it was quite evident. "But one thing I can't understand. It was this same rascal that kidnapped the child."

Gray explained the scene at the farm-house of the preceding evening.

"Oho!" exclaimed the sheriff. "The rascal must then have transferred his captives to some confederate's care in short order after effecting their capture. This is encouraging!"

"You think so?" inquired Willard.

"Without a doubt. Why, I even question if they are not somewhere still in our vicinity!"

"Why so?"

"Well, a great risk would have been run in taking the nurse and child directly to New York, even with the former rendered insensible or crazy to facilitate the attempt. There are unscrupulous country folks round about who would have secretly taken charge of 'em temporarily, and no questions asked, for a consideration."

"It is to be hoped so," interposed the detective. "But this last escapade argues O'Meara to have been hard up for money at the time."

"That is true. However, all New York City, no less than Westchester, is on the lookout for nurse and child. It can hardly be a question of another day before they are brought back. Do you gentlemen ever take a nip at so early an hour? I do."

This invitation was gratefully declined, after which the team was turned homeward.

They took the Webb farmstead in on their way back to the manse.

The house was agog with excitement, and from Mrs. Webb, who came waddling out to the gate with a red face and sore eyes, some particulars of the elopement were learned.

They, however, were not numerous.

The absconding couple, it was thought, had taken their departure at about midnight when the storm was at its height.

The farmer's best team and six hundred and fifty dollars of his money, all he had out of bank, had disappeared at the same time.

The couple's first notification had been in the shape of a characteristic note of explanation from their romantic daughter, which the old gentleman had found pinned to his waistcoat when preparing to visit his stock an hour before daylight.

The note, which the indignant mamma had no hesitation in exhibiting, was rather original in its way, and the following is a copy:

"DERE MA AND PA:—

"I'm going to marry the kount, and you may neckst hear from me as the proud kountess of his kastel on the Ganges, w'ich he says is his cheef summer rezidense. Excuse our taking the munny and the team, but the kount happens to be short, thow at the end of a week he expектs to have a grate some of munny."

LIBBY."

"The idear of that gal leaving such a cold-blooded note for her pore parents, as have brought up and edicated her so fine," vapored the farm-wife, in a fury of indignation. "And then the money! Lord help 'em if we run 'em down! I say, Mr. Gray, you or Mr. Willard called the count by some other name last evening. Ain't he of no 'count at all, do you think?"

The detective reflected a moment, and then resolved that it was best for the poor woman to know the truth.

"Of very small account, my good friend," he replied. "His real name is O'Meara, and he is nothing less than a desperate adventurer and criminal."

Mrs. Webb threw up her hands.

"Oh, why didn't you say so before?" she wailed.

"If you had taken the trouble to inquire into the man's character, you might easily have saved yourselves this shame and trouble," was the not very consoling reply. "As for your daughter, one would think her old enough to take care of herself."

"Oh, it's too bad!" moaned the farm-wife. "But the Lord help that deceivin' man when poor Libby learns of his bein' no count at all, and then lights onto him for his treachery!"

"She will only have to sit on the fellow once, I should say, for him to regret his bargain. But be of good heart, ma'm, and try to hope for the best."

As they were turning into the manse driveway, an old man was suddenly observed trudging on a short distance ahead.

While they were wondering who he might be, he turned his face, after which he instantly turned out of sight into the narrow path that Edna had pursued so fatefully at the opening of our story.

Springsteel Steve had uttered a slight exclamation, sprung from the buggy, after bringing the team to a sudden halt, and was off in pursuit like a greyhound.

Edgar followed him as soon as he could quiet the horses, and without waiting to make them fast.

It was the mysterious dead man's double,

whose face had momentarily been revealed to them.

But he had vanished down the path as if by magic.

The pursuers came to a pause at the bottom of the hollow, and confronted each other blankly.

"Did you see him again after getting into the path after him?" demanded Willard.

"Yes; just a last glimpse as he was making that second turn. Let's go back. He may have turned off to one side and doubled on us."

This proved to be true.

As they were retracing their steps, there was the crack of a whip, followed by a trampling of hoofs and the whisk of rapidly revolving wheels.

They rushed back into the driveway, but only in time to see the fugitive disappearing round the turn into the public road, with the team, which consisted of Willard's favorite span, in magnificent control.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A FLASH OF SUNSHINE.

THE ex-detective was not in the habit of using strong language, but it must be confessed that he did so on that occasion.

The two men had run to the drive entrance, whence they stood watching the team till it disappeared.

"Needs must when the devil drives!" quoted Willard, half to himself. "Come, father, let us be getting home. I am about done up."

"So am I. But the team, man!"

"We shall bear from it in due season, I haven't a doubt. If a phantom can run away with it, I doubt if he will dispose of it for money without attracting more attention than would be agreeable."

"Perhaps not. But this is very extraordinary, my boy! In fact, I can't remember anything more extraordinary than this in the course of my entire career as a detective."

The team was returned to the manse at about noon by a countryman from twenty miles away over the Connecticut line, who said that an odd old man had placed it in his charge, with the simple remark that a liberal reward would probably be paid for its return to the owner, whose name and locality he mentioned.

The horses, though giving evidence of hard driving, were in pretty fair condition, and Willard cheerfully paid the countryman five dollars for his trouble.

"What sort of looking old fellow was it from whom you received charge of the team, my friend?" demanded Mr. Gray.

"A queer, shabby-looking old man, with white hair and beard, and a rather nasty look in his eyes," was the reply. "He also carried a gripsack and a queer-looking walking-stick, or sort of rod, with sort of silvery prongs at one end."

"Did you have no further conversation with him?"

"I didn't have any at all. After telling me what to do, he made no answer to my questions, but started off on foot. My wife came to the door, while I was at the horses' heads, and called after the old man, asking him if he wouldn't like something to eat. But he wouldn't even turn his head, 'till he was soon out of sight. He walked very lively, and seemed uncommon vigorous for a man of his age."

Edna had awakened from her long sleep much refreshed and invigorated, though the suspense soon grew upon her again.

She heard of Libby's elopement with apathy, and insisted on being driven about the country in order to make random inquiries that could be of no manner of use.

However, toward the close of the day Sheriff Langley put in an appearance, with a little less hopeless intelligence than might have been expected.

"A queer anonymous note reached me through the post-office an hour ago," said he. "And as I don't exactly know what to think of it I brought it along for Springsteel to look at."

The letter was in a cramped feminine hand, to the following effect:

MR. SHERIFF:—

Please tell the Willard couple that the writer is on track of their stolen child, and will probably be able to restore it to them, safe, sound, and without reward, by Sunday night or Monday morning next.

"A FRIEND."

The handwriting was wholly unfamiliar.

"What value do you yourself place on it, Jake?" demanded Springsteel.

"I think it is hopeful; that's all."

"I do, too. The fact of its having been written by a woman is in favor of its genuineness."

"Why?" asked Edgar.

"Well, women are apt to be soft-hearted, my boy. And the child may have been put in secret charge of some poor woman who has since heard of its having been stolen, and is now beginning to weaken."

"In that case, why the delay, since she avows that no reward will be expected?"

"A good enough point, my boy. However, the only thing to do is to wait for Sunday night and Monday morning, if nothing better turns up in the mean time."

"Sunday night and Monday morning, when it is now but Friday!" burst out Edna, with passionate bitterness. "But what of my lost darling till then?"

And she once more gave way to a tempest of useless anguish.

But nothing could be done, and nothing of any hopefulness offered itself again until the following Sunday.

In the middle of the afternoon Langley again made his appearance.

"No more word from my anonymous correspondent as yet," said he. "But I've nevertheless made a startling discovery."

Willard and Springsteel were at once deeply interested, while Edna, who had grown pitifully thin and worn, looked up eagerly.

"I have just learned," continued the sheriff, "that the eloping couple took a south-going train at Tarrytown early this morning, after being driven thither in a close coach from White Plains."

"What!" exclaimed Edgar; "they have then been hiding in the village ever since the elopement?"

"Undoubtedly, or in its near neighborhood."

"But this seems scarcely credible!"

"Oh, it is a trick worthy of even Red O'Meara!" cried the old detective. "What else have you learned, Jake?"

"Not much. But I have found the livery-man who drove them over—a chap from Mount Vernon."

"Where had he taken them aboard?"

"At a spot on the road to Tuckahoe, one mile out of White Plains; he met them there, by appointment through the post-office on the previous day."

"The whole county has been roused over the elopement. Wasn't the fellow's suspicions wakened up as to their identity?"

"Perhaps so, and put to sleep again. At all events, he only grinned in response to my inquiries, and volunteered the remark that he was paid for carrying passengers, not for catching runaways."

"A shrewd trick!" repeated Springsteel. "Where could they have kept themselves so snugly for three days in gossiping White Plains, with none the wiser?"

The party were seated on the front piazza, and at this juncture the sheriff started up with a good deal of surprise.

"Perhaps she might know!" he exclaimed, pointing down the drive. "What! were you expecting a visit from the old grenadier in petticoats?"

The surprise of the others was no less complete.

It was Miss Raw's appearance on the drive that was the occasion of it all.

Primly enthroned in lonely state on the fore-seat of a dilapidated carryall, drawn by a bony quadruped of architectural aspect, she was holding the lines with a resolute grip, and not a muscle of her hard features changed until she had come to a solemn halt at the foot of the piazza steps.

Her announcement was then fully at par with the unexpectedness of her appearance.

"Mrs. Willard!" she called out, in her harshest and most cracked voice; "you've beerd me say as how I don't like kids, and neither I don't, on general principles, specially wher they spew and squack. But that's not sayin' that I'm willin' to see 'em trod over rough-shod, an' abused. You'd better come down an' get your nuss and babby out of this wagon. I've got about enough of 'em."

Edna was down at the wagon with a scream, and the men were not far behind.

The side-covering was torn aside. The next instant the heir of Willard Hall was in his mother's arms, while Mary, the nurse, looking dazed and bewildered, was helped out by the detective.

"You'd better look to that gal!" suggested Miss Raw, who had scarcely changed her ramrod erectness a hair's-breadth. "She's been stunned with p'izen, or somethin' or other, an' don't seem in her right senses."

Mary, who had indeed seemed hardly to know where she was, here made a violent attempt to tear the baby out of the mother's arms, raving incoherently that he should not be harmed, or something to that effect.

She was given in charge of her fellow-servants, who had come trooping from the house in a high state of joyous excitement over the good news, and Willard gave orders for the physician to be summoned without delay.

As for the son and heir, he was in prime condition and spirits.

"Wasn't you that sent me the anonymous note I got on Friday, ma'm?" was Sheriff Langley's first question of Miss Raw.

"Young man, it was my effort, and I ain't ashamed of it, nuther."

"Nor need you be, ma'm; but how have you been able to effect this good work?"

"That's tellin' secrets."

"Still you might prove yourself yet more amiable by letting us know."

"If I'm asked to stay to tea, perhaps I will."

The overjoyed young couple were only too happy to extend the desired invitation.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MISS RAW'S CONTINUED SURPRISES.

MISS RAW was gravely solicitous as to the welfare of her horse.

"Be mighty keerful of that dumb critter, young man," said she to the coachman, who had been summoned to take the animal in charge. "Eff this is a hired turnout, I'm mighty pertickler as to the treatment of dumb critters."

She carried an old-fashioned reticule, which the sheriff gallantly offered to take charge of while escorting her up the piazza steps, but Miss Raw slightly recoiled, with a decided, "Not eff I know it, Shurff Jake; so don't you try on your sweet sugar airs with me!"

She maintained a rigidly taciturn air until after tea, and it was only when they were all seated on the piazza a little later that she descended to unbend.

"You're like enough expectin' some sort of regular story from me," said she. "But you ain't agooin' to get it. I ain't good at conseckeytive yarnin', an' never was. But what I choose to let ye snake out of me by questions, as sha'n't be impertinent, you air welcome to. Mr. Thiefketcher there," (pointing to old Springsteel) "kin prehaps turn the pumpin' crank 'bout as well as anybody else."

The veteran detective smiled his appreciation of the not very certain compliment conveyed, crossed his legs, assumed his most urbanely judicious air, and proceeded to his rather congenial task without preamble or delay.

"Who was the abductor of the nurse and child, Miss Raw?"

"That dirty thief, O'Meara."

"Who was his confederate?"

"Don't know."

"When did you first get wind of the place of captivity?"

"Friday, afore daylight."

"Of whom did you obtain the information?"

"Of O'Meara, when he 'loped to my house with that lunkin' big fool-elephant, Libby Webb."

"Ah! the eloping couple have then been with you."

"Till this mornin' early, when I made 'em up traps and scoot. May it please this here court an' jury, howsomever, I want to make a statement in defense of my own reppertation."

"Certainly, Miss Raw."

"I want to say, emphatic, that I only consented to take 'em in because I hoped by that means to find out what had become of the missin' kid and nuss. And, furder, that—with genuinely modest confusion—"they ockerped separate apartmings while under my roof."

"We might have known as much, without your statement to the fact, Miss Raw, since your character is above suspicion."

"Thankee, Mr. Thief-ketcher."

"Now let us go on. Did O'Meara volunteer the information as to where he had disposed the girl and child?"

"He did, thinkin' me his friend, whereas I hate the man wuss'n p'izen ivy, with a rattle-snake throwed in. That very mornin', while they was asleep, I writ an' posted that 'ere enormous letter to Shurff Jake."

"Could you not have relieved the dreadful suspense of Mr. and Mrs. Willard without the delay?"

"No, sir; much as I would have liked to. Oh, Lord! d'y'e think that I didn't feel for her?" with a kindly look toward Edna, who was still keeping the child, now fast asleep, pressed to her bosom. "Well, I did, anyway."

"Pardon me, Miss Raw, for asking why you thought the delay necessary?"

"I don't only hate that man, I fear him. He would have killed me on suspicion of my playing him false. I even shivered all the time I writ that note to the shurff. He may kill me yet when he finds out."

"Oh, no dangor of that, I think!"

"Well, you kin jest bet he won't, ef I kin help it."

"Was Miss Libby aware of O'Meara's villainy before eloping with him?"

"No, she wasn't. There's that much to the fool-elephant's credit, any way. Fact is, she's been blubberin' over it ever sence."

"How did you get rid of them at last?"

"By purtendin' that my next-door neighbor was growin' suspicious-like."

"How did they get away without exciting remark?"

"By going off on foot before sun-up. What's become of 'em I don't care."

"They're off to New York, so you can rest easy on that score. Did O'Meara treat his companion kindly?"

"Well, sorter. He'd kiss her now and then, but would mostly laugh at her for a fool, or get mad at her blubberin'."

"But she had the money stolen from her father, hadn't she?"

"Not a cent. He had made her fork over every bit of it, saying that women couldn't take care of money. 'Mebbe some can't,' thinks I to myself, 'but ef I was that fool-gal I'd try to make one 'ception to the rule, anyway.'

"Well, Miss Raw, what did you do this morn-

ing, after getting rid of your unwelcome guests?"

"Swallered some breakfast, includin' a quart measure of hot tea, fu'st off."

"Ah! And then?"

"Hired the turnout of Tom Biggs (dollar 'n' a half far all day, an' he to call bisself a Christian, too!) an' set off to find the kid an' nuss."

"Where were they?"

"Way up in Whippoorwill, eighteen mile from the Plains, in a shoemaker's cabin, where they was to be kept at a dollar a day till called for."

"Were they being well cared for?"

"First rate, the child 'specially. You see the shoemaker's wife hed lost a babby of her own only the week afore, an' Mrs. Willard's got the milk what t'other one would hav had. They seemed to have most trouble with the nuss, who had been dosed or drugged with suthin' that had left her sort of loony, jest as she is now, or-wuss."

"Name of the couple?"

"Simmons."

The detective started a little, as did one or two of the others.

"Simmons, eh? Had they suspected that anything was wrong?"

"I guess not. Peared to be ignorant and innercent. Besides that, they seemed to have trouble enough of their own."

"What seemed to be their trouble?"

"Couldn't tell exactly. But it seemed to be about a son of theirs, a sailor chap, what is nigh on to death in one of the New York horsepickles, an' they not able to fetch him out to hum, where he might hav a chance to get well."

"That will do, Miss Raw. And I hope you won't be offended at my saying that I consider you a thoroughly noble woman. I wouldn't have expected it of you. You're a rough diamond, from top to toe."

Miss Raw arose stiffly.

"I'd thank one of you chaps to order around my critter," said she. "I didn't come here to be soft-sawdered; an' what's more, I don't want to be late to Methodist meetin', for I'm sort of pious on occasion, ef I don't 'zactly look it."

But here both Edgar and Edna, with their hearts overflowing, pressed forward to grasp her hands.

"We must be your friends henceforth, dear Miss Raw!" exclaimed the latter. "Oh, you will sometimes let me do something for you, won't you?"

"I want to be your friend, too, Miss Raw!" cried the young man. "Apart, wholly apart from any secret you may possess"—this in a low voice—"I want you to consider me your friend and well-wisher from this time forth."

Miss Raw seemed to stiffen up more formidably and forbiddingly than ever, at first; and then, to the astonishment of all, she not only grasped their outstretched hands, but kissed them both, husband and wife (though the last-named first) squarely on the forehead.

"What air you two, anyway, but a couple of young ones yourselves?" she said. "Howsomever, I hope you ken take keer of the babby be-twixt you."

After that she was instantly her iron, ramrod self again, looking as gaunt, spare and uncompromising as ever.

"Shurff Jake, air you going my way?" she asked, as her equipage was brought up to the piazza. "If you air, I don't mind giving you a friendly lift so fur as the Plains."

But Langley had driven over in his own team, and was compelled to decline the offer.

Then Miss Raw vouchsafed to unbend once more before climbing into her carryall.

"I say, you-'uns," she remarked, particularizing the domestic trio, "I'll relieve your minds by saying one thing—at present. There is a twin brother, an' I'll unbutton my lips to any extent when you've cornered him."

Then, after resuming her seat behind the architectural steed, and taking up the lines, she seemed to soften yet further.

"Of course the demand of mine fur half the estate was humbug, to keep up the idear that I was on the side of that skunk, O'Meara," she called out. "Come round to my cottage tomorrow, early as you please, and, if still alive, I'll tell you all I know about all you want to know."

"Ah, why wait for to-morrow?" cried Springsteel Steve, who was ever wary of postponements, and he stepped forward with his most wheedling smile. "Why not relieve our anxieties now, at once and for all?"

She shook her head.

"I'm tired an' worked up; besides there's that Methodist meetin'. Can't think of it. To-morrow, early as you please."

And she drove off.

Sheriff Langley, to whom all had been more or less incomprehensible, was partially enlightened by the old detective, when he too drove away, leaving lightened hearts and fast reviving hopes behind him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER BLACK CLOUD.

THERE was an early and almost joyous breakfast at Willard Manse on the following day.

After it was finished Edgar Willard and Springsteel Steve set out at once for White Plains, full of high hopes as to the importance of odd Miss Raw's promised revelation.

Edna would gladly have accompanied them, but the condition of the unfortunate nurse was so serious that she decided it best to remain at the manse with the baby and her.

The physician, after learning all that was to be told, had decided that the young woman was suffering from the continued and perhaps dangerous effects of some subtly powerful poison, as yet undetermined, and probably administered by enforced inhalation.

She seemed only to have retained her energies by a supreme effort of will in the child's behalf, but had steadily sunk upon being placed in bed and relieved of her responsibility, and was now delirious, a dangerously and somewhat mysteriously sick young woman.

"If Miss Raw shall really make everything clear," said the old detective, while driving along with his companion, "what a splendid thing for you, my boy, out of this miserable complication."

"I only hope she may be able to," returned Willard.

"I haven't a doubt of it. There's no denying that the woman's sudden evolution of this new and benevolent character is most surprising—no one could have anticipated it."

"True; there's no denying that."

"Well, my boy, these unexpectedly rough diamonds mostly perform more, and seldom less, than they promise. I've always noticed that."

"I think you are right."

"Well, and what is it she said her promise was worth, when pretending to want half the estate as the price of her secret?"

"She promised that it would instantly take me out of O'Meara's power; and, not only that, but it would render the prosecution of *any* one impossible for the murder of Miser John Willard, of Willard Manse, five years ago. As nearly as I can recollect, that was almost her exact language."

"The deuce! that ought to be enough."

"I should say so."

"Rather mysterious, too, eh?"

"Decidedly so."

"Why, accepting the words of Miss Raw's promise literally, it would apparently turn out that one of two extraordinary things might have happened."

"What are they?"

"Either that Miser John Willard murdered himself, or that he wasn't murdered at all."

"It would seem so; and yet either supposition is too preposterous for a moment's consideration."

"Well, thank the Lord! Miss Raw is at last going to unbutton her lip, as she calls it, and our continued suspense will be soon at an end."

He whipped up the team.

But just as they were turning into the modest street where Miss Raw resided, Sheriff Langley, who was lounging near, as though expecting them, made a sign, and the team was reined up.

"I shouldn't wonder if you're doomed to be disappointed," said he.

"Why do you say that, Jake?" demanded Springsteel.

"You're on your way to Miss Raw's cottage, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if she's skipped off, too."

"Cottage still shut up?"

"Yes; and she mostly stirring about and freshening things up before sunrise, according to the neighbors."

"Perhaps you'd better come along with us, Jake."

The sheriff did so, following along on foot.

As he had said, the cottage was found closely-barred and closely-shuttered; nor did the most vigorous knocking at the front door awaken anything but hollow echoes for a response.

"Let's go round back," suggested the detective. "Perhaps we'll have better luck there."

He led the way around the side of the house, through a little strip of garden that was unfamiliar to all the men.

There was a little porch and door at the rear, the first sight of which caused the old detective to knit his brows.

"Bad, bad!" he muttered. "The door has already been forced. See!" and with the mere pressure of his hand he pushed it open, without even turning the knob. "Bad, bad! But let us still hope that no misfortune has overtaken the poor woman."

He preceded his companions in exploring the rooms.

At the door of what had been Miss Raw's sleeping apartment, he suddenly drew back, after looking within, and turned with that peculiar change of expression that must come into every countenance, however disciplined, when brought very unexpectedly into the presence of death.

They pushed forward hurriedly.

A misfortune had indeed overtaken the poor woman.

She had been murdered in her bed!

There were signs of a fierce but brief struggle

for life, but the poor angular body of the eccentric woman was lying composedly at last, though on a perfectly blood-drenched bed, with a stab wound in the breast and her throat cut from ear to ear.

Edgar Willard was especially agonized over the tragic spectacle.

"My God!" he gasped; "the woman's fidelity to her better instincts has probably cost her her life. 'O'Meara again! O'Meara again! I'd almost swear to it!"

But the inquest over, the remains of poor Miss Raw brought nothing positively to light.

The truth, indeed, came out as to the eloping couple having been her temporary guests, so to speak, but that was not seen, in the general opinion, to have any special connection with the crime.

The assassin had come, slain and gone, without leaving a trace behind as to his identity.

The verdict of the coroner's jury was in accordance with the absence of facts.

At Miss Raw's funeral, however, two days later, a singular incident happened, or one that was significant for such as are interwoven in this strange narrative's web and woof.

The burial was conducted without regard to expense, under Edgar Willard's direction, the interment being in the old Willard plot in the White Plains Cemetery.

As a matter of course, the funeral had attracted an immense attendance, by reason of the sensation which the mystery of the murder had caused.

But the space about the new-made grave was at last deserted save by the family group, consisting of Edgar, Edna and the latter's father, who were moving slowly away from the plot, intending to stop at the adjoining house of the care-taker and florist, to arrange for flowers to be planted as a preliminary to the selection of a suitable monumental stone.

They had left the family plot far behind, and there were many intervening plots and monuments, but with the former place still conspicuous by reason of certain distinguishing features, when Edna, who was lagging a little behind her companions chanced to look back.

Instantly her startled exclamation caused the others to turn also.

"Look!" she cried; "another and still later mourner at her grave."

She was pointing to an aged figure, the figure of an old man, shabbily attired, that was kneeling, bowed as if in prayer, over the new-made grave.

At that instant the man's face came into view—the face of the dead man's double, whose mystery, save for "the deep damnation of her taking off," the unfortunate Miss Raw was to have cleared up so effectually.

In another instant old Springsteel Steve was bounding toward the spot, in a bee-line that made no account of plots, headstones, tablets or other obstruction in its way.

But the mysterious mourner stepped, with seeming leisureliness, out of sight, and when the detective returned from his pursuit a little later, it was only to announce its exasperating non-success.

"The deuce take it all!" he growled, wiping the sweat from his brow and slowly recovering his breath; "were it not for the ingrained horse-sense in my composition, I'd be tempted to believe in the supernaturalness of that old *ignis fatuus*, after all. I had my hand almost on his very shoulder when he suddenly slipped behind a monument and was just—nowhere!"

This was in the morning.

After lunch at the manse, Springsteel announced that he was bent on an expedition, and stepped into the buckboard which had been driven round for him.

"Where are you going?" they inquired.

"Do you forget that to-morrow is the last day of O'Meara's allotted week for his alternative to be decided on?" asked Springsteel in return.

No; they had not forgotten that; but where was he going?

"To Whippoorwill, wherever that may be," was the parting response. "There is an old shoemaker up that way named Simmons."

CHAPTER XXXV.

SUSPENSE.

"WHERE is Whippoorwill?" asked Edna of her husband, after her father had driven away.

"Away up Newcastle and Armonk ways," he replied.

"Oh, yes; where poor Miss Raw went in search of Willie and the nurse?"

"Yes; it is said to be one of the wildest and most picturesque spots in Westchester county—somewhere near Wampus Pond, I believe."

"What can my father want there?"

"To interview the Simmonses, the couple who had our child you know."

"Yes; but what for?"

"Don't you remember Miss Raw saying that they were in trouble over their son, a sailor, sick to death in some hospital in New York?"

"Oh, yes; and now I begin to understand, or rather to take over again the impression of poor Miss Raw's words. It is probably the same

sailor, calling himself Timmins, who was associated with his uncle, the man Swart, or Black, and O'Meara in the—the horror?"

"Probably."

"And my father is in hopes, on this last day of grace, to secure the sailor's testimony in your behalf, in case—"

She paused, turning pale, not daring to complete the sentence.

"Of course, my love!" and he took her protectingly in his arms as he finished it for her:—"In case O'Meara fulfills his threat of handing me over to the authorities on the charge."

"You think he will?"

"I haven't a doubt of it. O'Meara was ever a man of his word when that word was a menace; and he must have seen by this time that it is my intention to calmly defy him. Besides, this threat, now that we have our child back, is the last string to his bow, as he would call it. But to-morrow will tell the tale."

"Still, will not the villain surrender his last pecuniary hope by fulfilling his threat?"

"Yes; but he will glut his spite, which is always something in a devil's calculations. Besides, he might still hope to squeeze me toward the last."

"In what way?"

"By my weakening, after once fairly experiencing the inside of a prison cell, with perhaps the gallows staring me in the face."

Edna shuddered, and caught her breath.

"It is well to face the worst before it comes," continued her husband, gravely kissing her. "That would be O'Meara's last hope:—in my possible desperation, combined with her offer to effect a seasonable disappearance—for a consideration."

"But wait!" she started from him, pressing her hands to his temples. "He would not dare to press the charge in person now!"

"Why?"

"Could he not be charged with the assassination of Miss Raw?"

"Doubtless—as an embarrassing counter-stroke, but no more. Your father and I have talked it over. It is more than likely that the counter-charge could not be sustained with any degree of success."

"You believe, though, that he murdered her?"

"I do, and so does your father. But believing is not proving."

"Stay! Supposing him the perpetrator of the crime, his motive would have been revenge for what he would deem her having broken faith with him?"

"Yes."

"How could he have known so promptly of her having restored the child to us? You know how quickly her penalty followed upon that noble act."

Edgar knitted his brows.

"That is something both your father and I are puzzled over," said he. "O'Meara could only have known of it so promptly by spying around the premises here on that memorable Sunday evening, or by having some one else spying and eavesdropping in his interest."

"Well?"

"We have about concluded that it could hardly have been O'Meara himself—the risk was such as he would scarcely have taken—so that it must have been some one else in his interest."

"But there is not one of our servants who can be suspected of such a thing."

"Not one."

"Who then could the villain's spy have been?"

"We can think of but one person."

"Which one?"

"The Appearance, the Twin, the Mystery, or howsoever he may be designated—my murdered grandfather's Double."

Edna started, and then, after a moment's reflection, shook her head decisively.

"It could not be!" she exclaimed. "That mysterious person, whoever he is, could not be friendly to O'Meara. It is even doubtful, very doubtful, if O'Meara can know of his existence."

"That is what we have thought all along. Still, we have not been able to settle upon any other in this connection."

"My darling! what shall you do if—if you are arrested?"

"Remember Springsteel Steve's advice first above all things—take things coolly and keep my mouth shut." was the prompt reply.

"But you will say that you are innocent?"

"Only that."

"And will charge O'Meara with Miss Raw's murder?"

"I am not certain—your father will have thought it over, and have decided, by the time he returns. However, Sheriff Langley would doubtless make that charge, in any event. He believes in the scoundrel's guilt no less than we; and is, moreover, still running over with wounded self-love and secret resentment, by reason of that ridiculous elopement."

"True. Poor Miss Libby! And no wonder that poor Mr. Langley feels sore at having been thrown over for such a scoundrel, though she is likely to rue the fault so dearly. Well, should Sheriff Langley fail to make the counter-charge, I shall, depend upon it."

"You?"

"Yes; and it shall have some legs to sustain it, too!"

Edgar again took her in his arms, and kissed her seriously.

"Listen to me, my own," said he. "Should this that we so dread come to the worst, and we be separated, you will have enough to do to bear up, while attending to your next most important duty after thinking of me."

"Ah! and that?"

"In looking after the continued safety of our child."

"What! you think I have not dwelt upon that?"

"I wouldn't hint such a thing. But a second attempt might be made to steal the child. O'Meara would leave no stone unturned to resume that terrorization over our heads; it would be his last hope of obtaining anything but his bald, penniless revenge."

"I shall tell you something you haven't suspected."

"What is it?"

"Every night since our Willie was restored to us, Big Albert has made his cot-bed directly across the closed door of our sleeping apartment, in which my baby has slumbered in my arms."

"You surprise me."

"I thought I would, but that is not all. Patrick, the coachman, now occupies the little hall-room adjoining ours; while Czar and Emperor, our largest and faithfulest watch-dogs patrol the inner corridors; to say nothing of the dogs outside the house."

"Admirable precautions! I should not have thought of them."

"Well, they shall be just doubled—nay, trebled—if—if you should be taken away from me, if even for a day. But I must not, I shall not think of that. Oh, if my father had only remained with us! I wish he hadn't gone."

"Be not alarmed. He will be able to inquire his way easily up through Whippoorwill; and, as he has taken the best horse in the stables, he ought to be with us again at least before bed-time, if not sooner."

But the time passed, and even bed-time, which was usually half-past ten o'clock at the manse, came and went without any signs of the old detective's eagerly-anticipated return.

"Splendid moonlight, too, and the roads in prime condition!" muttered Edgar, after his twentieth excursion, at least, from library to piazza. "Really, this is inexplicable."

"How far is it to Whippoorwill?" demanded Edna.

"Less than fourteen miles by the route your father would have taken—that is, around by Rye Lake and Ferguson's Corners, through Armonk."

"Twenty-eight altogether, and he started less than an hour after midday. Why, he ought to have made that with ease, even over poor roads."

"Something may have happened to the wheels—and yet that buckboard he took ought to stand anything. However, Springsteel Steve is the man to take care of himself, if there ever was one. We'll sit up till midnight, and then go to bed, if he doesn't turn up."

But it was fated that the night should be an uneasy one.

Word was presently brought that Mary, the nurse, was very much worse.

The physician was hastily summoned, but could do nothing.

The poor girl died at midnight, in the mild delirium that had seized upon her soon after being put to bed, and doubtless having never been in her proper mind from the first hour of the kidnapping.

She was an honest, faithful Protestant Irish girl, with no near relatives so far as was known, and had been a favorite with the young couple and her fellow-domestics.

With her passed away the last chance of obtaining any particulars of the heartless abduction that had marked her as its victim.

"She, too, has been done to death in our unhappy cause!" murmured Edna, rising with streaming eyes from beside the couch of death; "done to death by that same O'Meara, the evil genius of our house!"

Morning came, after a few hours of broken rest, and the old detective was still *non est*.

Edgar, soon after breakfast, was about ordering his saddle-horse, with the intention of going off in search of the missing man, when his wife called him out upon the piazza, with a significant tremor in the voice she tried to render firm.

No need for her to point with her hand, as he silently obeyed the call.

Two men, easily recognized as town constables, had come to a pause at the side of the drive, while a third, evidently with some anxiety in his stern, pitilessly uncompromising face, was marching straight up toward the house.

It was Red O'Meara, coming to make his last demand!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SPRINGSTEEL'S QUEST.

To return to our old detective, Springsteel Steve, he had proceeded on his way very brisk-

ly and comfortably after quitting the manse until he stopped to water his horse at the Crystal Springs Hotel, at Ferguson's Corners, and inquire the way of its genial proprietor, Mr. Blake.

"Where is Whippoorwill, my friend?" inquired the detective, when Blake had come up out of his spring-house cellar, where he had been industriously engaged in bottling lager beer.

"Over beyond Armonk," was the reply, with the characteristic addition: "I've more than once fiddled for dances over that way."

"Ah! you are a violinist?"

"Yes, sir," with modest pride, "and harpist. In fact, I am considered the only Native American professional harp-player in these United States."

"The harp is a good thing," said Springsteel; and, having watered his horse, he gently abstracted a bottle of beer from under the musical publican's arm, let fly the patent stopper, and proceeded to extract its contents for his own internal refreshment without waiting for a glass. "Well, my friend," dropping the requisite coin into the landlord's extended hand, "if your harping is as good as your beer, you'll never be state-prisoned for creating a musical discord."

"No, I don't believe I will," said Blake, who was something of an original in his way; "for good beer is like good music—it touches the spot. Try another with me." And he handed over a fresh bottle, while opening one for his own delectation. "You see, I'm not the sort of apothecary who is afraid of his own medicine."

"Good road from here to Armonk?" queried the detective, after politely wishing success to the Crystal Springs Hotel.

"Fairish," was the response.

"And from there into Whippoorwill?"

"The worst in Westchester county."

"Humph! Do you know of a couple living thereabouts named Simmons?"

"The same that Miss Raw visited last Sunday, and then went home to be murdered?

"The same."

"I do know them."

"I want to go to their house."

The landlord kindly gave minute directions for reaching the house, which he off-handedly represented as the most God-forsaken spot on earth, and readily volunteered what he knew of the couple.

"A hard-working and honest pair, sir, both Sylvester and Martha Simmons, but poorer than Job's turkey, as shoemakers mostly air."

"Haven't they a son, who became a sailor."

"That was Tom, their only child."

"Know anything of him?"

"I went to school with him."

"What of him?"

"A wild lad, sir, and a bad egg. He took to the sea early, but was anything before that, from a chicken-thief to a drunkard. He was made worse, too, through association with his wife's brother, Jim Black, a desperate sort of hound, who once kept a little farm at Purchase."

"Heard anything of Tom Simmons of late?"

"Not for years. Doubtless drowned or hanged before this."

And, as the old detective drove on, after declining another bottle of beer, and thanking the landlord for his information, the latter muttered to himself: "If that old gentleman isn't a Methodist parson, I'd set him down for a liquor-license sharp or a New York detective."

Springsteel found that his informant had not exaggerated the wretchedness of the roads, and, after turning off from Armonk into the Whippoorwill district, he wished many times that he had come on horseback, in lieu of taking the buckboard.

The road was simply a succession of frightfully precipitous hills, and so full of ruts, gullies and stones as to suggest the course of a dried-up torrent.

The Simmons house was at last reached, however.

It was a miserable little mite of a house, surrounded by wild woods and rocky pastures, and so precariously perched near the top of a small mountain, overlooking a twisted lake or pond in the depths, as to cause one to wonder that it had not long since been blown away.

But the shoemaker, who was found at work at his bench, proved to be communicative on the subject of his ne'er-do-well son, when convinced that no harm was intended him, and Mrs. Simmons, a half-worked-to-death-looking woman, with ghostly traces of a bygone comeliness in her trouble-worn face, was no less complacent.

"My son-in-law Mr. Willard's idea is just this," said Springsteel, after introducing himself and his purpose with a few carefully-prepared remarks. "After learning from Miss Raw of your unhappiness at not being able to have your sick son with you, he thought he might be able to help you along to that end."

Both man and wife had brightened up at having the circumstance of the nurse and child recalled to them in this way, and the kindly manner of their visitor also impressed them favorably.

"What might be the object of so rich a man

as Mr. Willard wanting to help such poor folks as us along, sir?" was the shoemaker's first question.

"Doesn't the fact that he is rich and charitably-inclined explain itself?" said the detective, with a smile.

"Not by a darned sight!" with more vigor than discrimination. "In the first place, the richer the rich get the more they hate the poor; and in the next place, what can he know of Marthy and me any more than of shoe-leather, that he should want to step out of his way to give us a friendly lift?"

"There you're out, my man. Both my daughter and her husband are intensely grateful to you for your kindness toward their kidnapped child."

"Oh, that's it? Come, now, mister, there's some logic in that; though, of course, we didn't know there had been any kidnapping till Miss Raw told us."

The woman's face had lighted up.

"I was sorry to let the baby go," said she. "It was the cheerfulest young one for its age I ever see, and I almost thought it was my own lost little one that was taking the breast."

"Moreover," continued the detective, "my son-in-law is advised that your son Thomas may be able to help him with his testimony in a law-case about some property."

"Like enough," muttered the shoemaker. "Tom was a wild lad, and often mixed up with chaps who had more regard for other folks' property than their own, though I don't believe he ever stole anything on his own account."

"My proposition is just this: Give me directions how to find your son and bring him home to you, and it shall be done in short order. All I ask in return is that you shall truthfully answer a series of questions I wish to put to you."

"Tom won't come to any harm, will he?"

"Not that I know of," impatiently. "He isn't coming to any particular good in his present situation, I presume."

"Go ahead, mister. If you'll only promise to bring our boy home to us out of the hospital—in case he ain't dead already, which God forbid!—we'll answer any questions you like."

The promise was given, and the examination proceeded.

"When did you last see your son, Thomas Simmons?"

"Five years ago last —," mentioning the date of the Black Hollow Mystery.

"Under what circumstances?"

"Rather unexpectedly and late at night, after he'd been giving us the cold shoulder for several weeks, all along of his uncle, Jim Black, with whom he had been living and drinking down in Purchase. For you must know, sir, that that same Jim Black, though my own wife's brother, was about the peskiest, meanest—"

"No, I don't want to know that. Tell me briefly of your son's last visit here."

"He came in a great hurry, just as we were going to bed; said he'd arranged to take ship at daylight for t'other side of the world, and might never come back again; pressed something in my hand in giving it a parting shake; kissed and hugged his mother, and was then up and away like the wind, leaving me all dazed, and Marthy here a-crying her eyes out at the suddenness of it all."

"Was that all?"

"Not quite. There was that remaining which he had stuffed into my hand."

"What did that prove to be?"

"A handsome pocketbook, stuffed with banknotes, gold and silver coins, and some pieces of writing."

"Oho!"

"There were two hundred and thirty dollars in all—just enough to pay off the mortgage on our little place here, and there's where it went."

"Did you not suspect that the money might have been stolen?"

"Either that, or got by gambling, for Tom was something of a card-sharp, and could ruffle it with the best or worst of them."

"Well?"

"Well, my necessities, sir, inclined me to take the gambling view of it."

"I don't blame you for that. The pocketbook and pieces of writing that remained?"

"I've kept 'em ever since, sir, if you would like to examine 'em."

The detective nodded, and the wallet was forthwith produced by the woman out of an old chest.

The first glance filled him with surprise and gratification.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RED POCKETBOOK.

The pocketbook had belonged to Red O'Meara himself.

His initials, "L. O'M.", were on the red morocco cover in gilt, and even the papers it contained were personal bills, I O U's, and other evidences of gambling debts bearing his indorsement.

A moment's thought enabled the gratified detective to hit upon a theory as to the manner of these deeply incriminating articles having chanced into the minor thief's possession, but he

carefully abstained from comment, or from a manifestation of undue interest in the presence of the couple.

"A handsome wallet, and just the sort I would like for my own use!" said he, after an apparently listless examination. "I'll give you ten dollars for the pocketbook and contents."

The offer was greedily accepted, and the bargain clinched upon the spot.

But as the detective was slipping the purchase into his pocket, there was a suspicious movement behind him, at the little open window under which he was sitting, and he started to his feet.

The next instant he was out of and around the cottage like a flash, but without making any discovery.

"Do you ever have spies and listeners hereabouts?" he asked, on his return.

"Bless and save us, never!" exclaimed the shoemaker, while his wife seized a broomstick and darted out with something like fire in her eye; "and there ain't a neighbor within a quarter of a mile, neither."

"It was one of them stray cows from beyant the pastur'," explained 'Marthy,' returning with but half her broomstick, but with a triumphant look. "She had been at my mornin' glories under the winder-sill, but I've drove her down the lots with a sore back!"

Springsteel resumed his seat, though not with his back to the window, as before, and proceeded with his queries:

"So you have not seen your son since that night of his hurried departure?"

"No, sir; and we've only had two letters. The first was over a year ago from Shanghai, where he was in a hospital, expectin' to die."

"And the next?"

"Was from New York, a few weeks ago. He had partly recovered from his fever in China, but had only landed in New York to be taken down again. He thinks he's at death's point again, and begs us to send him some money. But bless you, sir, we never have a dollar ahead for ourselves!"

"Well, that's settled now, and you shall soon have your wanderer home with you again."

"Oh, sir! only do that for us, and we'll pray for you every night of our lives!" exclaimed the shoemaker's wife, clasping her hands, with glistening eyes.

"Yes, sir!" added the husband; "and we'll think it heavenly good luck that ever brought your kindness to our door."

"But I'm not through with my questions yet, my friends. You must now tell me about the child and nurse."

"All there is to tell, sir," was the cheerful response.

"Who brought them here?"

"A man who had called to see us the day before, to arrange for our taking care of them."

"Ah! describe the man."

"A strongly-made man of about thirty, well-dressed, with very dark complexion, piercing black eyes, and a big nose."

"Ah!" thought Springsteel to himself; "O'Meara's confederate, and not the master-scoundrel himself. What would I not give to identify and lay hands on the pupil, in lieu of missing the master!"

"Had you never seen the man before that?" he asked, aloud.

"Never, sir; though he seemed sort of familiar with the country and the folks hereabouts, too."

"Would he give no name?"

"No, sir."

"What did he say in making the arrangements?"

"He pretended that the baby he wanted to bring to us was his own, and he wanted to have it kept in hiding away from its mother, who, he said, was a wicked woman whom he was getting a divorce from."

"Ah! a likely yarn."

"Still, he made us believe it, sir, he was so earnest about it. But, for all that, Marthy refused to agree to take the baby until the gentleman had sworn that its own mother was so unnatural as to be bent on killing the little thing first chance."

"Then we came to terms, and he gave us five dollars in advance, which was just enough to stop the jaw of the grocer's man, who had been on the point of refusing us any more credit, and that without a pint of lamp oil in the house."

"Then the gentleman went away, but without telling us exactly when he would be able to bring the child. He said it would depend on circumstances."

"I should say so! What about the nurse?"

"He wasn't certain whether he would have to bring the child's nurse along, or not."

"Ah! so he brought both along after dark on the following day?"

"Yes; a good while after dark, and in a close-shut carriage, whose driver was swearing at the hard pulling his horses had been put to."

"Would you know the driver again?"

"I think not. He never quitted the box-seat, and the night was dark at that hour; though I might know his voice again, specially if I should hear him swear."

"Was not the nurse in a pitifully dazed condition?"

"Yes, sir; all broke up, as if sort of stunned-like; and she got worse before Miss Raw took her away; but she hung on to the baby, for all that."

"That she did, sir—poor thing!" interposed the wife. "It was all I could do to make her let me give the breast to the poor little thing, which was by that time crying dreadful."

"I should think the condition of the nurse would have made you suspect the foul play that had been."

"So it would, sir," said the shoemaker, "but for the gentleman's explanations."

"What did he say?"

"He said the young woman's mistress was a perfect devil, who had tried to poison her, and he had only at last succeeded in stealing both nurse and child away from their unhappy home with the utmost difficulty."

As there was evidently nothing more to be learned, Springsteel took the hospital address at which the sailor-son was supposed to be lying, and took his departure, after promising that the couple should have word from him again at the earliest opportunity, which would probably be on the following day.

Though now late in the afternoon, his horse was refreshed, there was a predominance of down-hill travel on the return trip, and, in spite of the miserableness of the Whippoorwill roads, he was confident of reaching home with what he considered his cheering news, before Edna or her husband could grow anxious as to his welfare.

But Springsteel had not forgotten the suspicious incident at the cottage window, and he was therefore on the alert for any chance treachery.

This, however, did not prevent his horse from shying violently at a certain dangerous turn of precipitous road, with a densely-wooded slope rising at one hand, and an almost unbroken steep descent on the other, ending with a sheer plunge into the sullen, hill-shadowed waters of Wampus Pond, twenty or thirty feet below.

A quick, comprehensive glance discovered no suspicious object to explain the animal's unwanted action, so the detective brought him up sharply, administered an admonitory cut with the whip and urged him on.

But after a few steps the horse shied even more violently than before, at the same time slightly rearing.

Then it was that the detective noticed slight smoke issuing from the stones directly to the right of the road, on the edge of the descent, much as if some wayfarer had thrown away the stub of a still burning cigar in passing.

"What the deuce!" he muttered, alighting from the vehicle, after soothing the animal with a kindly word or two.

But as he was advancing toward the spot whence the smoke was issuing, there was a deafening explosion.

Stones and earth flew into the air in a blinding shower, the ground quivered, horse and buckboard were sent toppling and plunging down the escarpment, and as the dazed detective staggered back against the wooded side of the torn-up road, maintaining his foothold with difficulty, he suddenly found himself murderously surrounded and assaulted by four powerful masked ruffians.

"Kill him!" ordered a deep, stern voice. "Murder him without mercy! but get back the red morocco pocketbook at any cost!"

Weakened as he was, and too much dazed by the combined shock and surprise to draw his revolver, the old veteran had clubbed his driving-whip and set about defending himself on the instant with the valor and address that he had shown in a hundred desperate emergencies of the checkered past.

But a moment's struggle convinced him that he must ultimately succumb if he persisted in facing such overwhelming odds.

At last, when he barely held his own, with his back to the descent, there came a shot from the leading assailant.

Though quite certain of having escaped the bullet, Springsteel gave a despairing cry, clapped his hand over his heart, and tumbled backward, head over heels, down the precipice.

He rolled and tumbled as one stricken to the death, disappearing with a hollow plunge into the shadowy waters that had already received the horse and buckboard, and was not seen again.

The ruffians peered down after him as well as the thick-gathering of the twilight's dusk would admit.

"After him somehow!" exclaimed the authoritative voice that had spoken before.

"The deuce! what for?" demanded one of the others. "He's deader than a herring. That bullet of yours struck him square in the heart—I could almost see it strike!"

"No matter; the red pocketbook must be recovered."

presumably murdered man, for the sake of a pocketbook or anything of the sort, which was not promised to be money-lined, and as their leader did not seem disposed to make the attempt in his own person, they presently withdrew into the woods on the upper side of the road, arguing and disputing as they disappeared.

In the mean time Springsteel Steve, rather recuperated than otherwise from his cooling immersion in the pond, had clung under the low bushes overhanging the water's edge, eagerly listening to every word.

Making sure at last that the scoundrels had taken themselves off, but not sure at what moment they might return to look for that red pocketbook, he at last crawled out on the bank, shook himself, and then began to skirt the water's edge along the line of the road as well as the rocky and precipitous nature of the bank would allow.

Darkness was fast coming on, but he presently perceived a bulky object floating near the margin, which he proceeded to examine more closely.

Much to his sorrow, it proved to be the dead body of the horse, with the submerged buckboard still attached.

Springsteel ground his teeth.

"The best animal in Edgar's stables, and as good a steed as ever trod on iron!" he muttered.

"Oh, but it's a big personal account that I shall have to settle with that fiend O'Meara hereafter! though how he manages to keep such efficient confederates in his service in his present financial straits is more than I can imagine. Humph! I could almost admire the rascal's ineffable boldness and disregard of consequences too."

That the ruffian assault, together with the similar but less deadly one that had preceded it by a week or so, should have been led or instigated by any one other than O'Meara, never entered his mind for a moment.

He was climbing back to the road when the sound of fresh voices caused him to pause and crouch hard against the face of the bank.

It soon became evident that they belonged to his recent assailants, who had reappeared at a point lower down the road, and they were now provided with lanterns.

From this fact the detective argued that they must have had a rendezvous—or perhaps a waiting team—not far from the wooded spot at which the mine or torpedo had been exploded.

He ground his teeth again, for the fate of the horse had incensed him even more deeply than the dastardly attempt against his own life.

But for the thought that his revolver was doubtless temporarily useless from the action of the water, he would have unhesitatingly ambushed the villains without mercy; and such a reprisal at that moment and in his vengeful temper would have gone hard with them.

As it was he remained quiet until they had passed on up the road, obviously, from such words as were let fall, in tardy pursuance of their leader's desire that the body of their supposed victim should be examined in the hope of obtaining the tell-tale red pocketbook.

The detective chuckled as he made sure of still possessing that article in his breast-pocket.

Then, the coast being clear, he regained the road, and hurried away in what he supposed to be the direction of Armonk.

But his bad luck seemed to cling to him in one form or another.

First, a sharp wind struck through him soon after getting back to the road line, and he was soon chilled to the bone by reason of his wet clothing, with the unpleasant consciousness that a long and disabling sickness might be in store for him if he should not soon succeed in reaching shelter, together with something to counteract the chills.

Case-hardened as he was, this thought was especially alarming to the detective.

"Great heavens! I must not, I dare not, I can't afford to be down sick at this juncture!" he murmured to himself, in a species of panic. "What would those great babies, Edna and Edgar, do in such an event? And to-morrow is the last of the days of grace allotted by O'Meara, too!"

He set out to run, in the hope that the briskness of movement would ward off the oncoming chills.

But they seemed to grow more violent, and, to add to his wretchedness, he presently became convinced that he had branched off upon some by-road by mistake.

However, as it seemed to be conducting him generally in the desired direction, he kept steadily on, running when able to, and with the chills growing more threatening with every mile traversed.

The road seemed to thread a desolate and mostly wooded region, with no dwellings whatever in its proximity.

At last when nearly exhausted, and quite satisfied that he had traversed more than the distance from the place of his misfortune to Armonk, he was lucky enough to meet an old man driving an ox-cart.

"Good-evening, my friend!" said the hapless detective, with chattering teeth. "Be good

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SPRINGSTEEL'S ADVENTURE.

THE minor ruffians continued to protest against the folly of going down in search of a

enough to tell me if I am in the right road to Armonk."

"No," was the surprised reply. "You're two miles to the southeast of it, sir."

Springsteel gave an inward groan.

"I am not well, and must reach a house of public entertainment of some sort," he exclaimed. "Will this road conduct me to one?"

"Yes, siree! A half a mile further on will fetch you bang up into Bill Blake's Crystal Springs Hotel door-yard."

"Thanks! thanks!" And on the shivering detective sped, with new hope in his heart, if not fresh speed in his heels.

He looked like a ghost when he staggered into the bar, ten minutes later, where the harp-playing and beer bottling landlord chanced to be alone.

"My friend," said Springsteel, in his quick, sharp way, "I've met with an accident, and am threatened with severe chills. It is absolutely necessary I should not succumb—that I shall be all right to-morrow morning. Can I have such accommodations here—the best, I mean—as I am willing to pay for?"

A hearty and sympathetic affirmative was the response.

"Good! Put me in a warm bed without an instant's unnecessary delay. Build a rousing fire in the room just as if it were midwinter. Then dose me with hot whisky and quinine till I tell you to stop, or am thrown into a state of sweating insensibility."

"I'll do it—and more, too!"

The nature of the "more too" was discovered half an hour later when the detective was beginning to fairly steam in bed under the heroic treatment he had prescribed for himself.

The blankets heaped upon him seemed to weigh scarcely less than a ton; the sixth glass of hot doctored whisky had been duly absorbed; the wood fire was roaring in the open fireplace, making the room as hot as an oven, notwithstanding that its door and two windows were wide open; the chills had ceased, and he was sweating like a stalled bull in the dog-days.

It was then that the tuneful landlord of the Crystal Springs Hotel evinced a magnanimous sympathy hardly less heroic than the self-imposed martyrdom of his stranger-guest.

He brought forth his beloved harp for the invalid's delectation.

In his bare feet, with nothing on but his trowsers and a gauze undershirt, and with the perspiration pouring down his own poetic brow and philosophic baldness, he planted himself firmly on his three-legged music-school, between the roaring hearth and the sweating couch, and, drawing the grand instrument between his scorching knees, he swept the strung chords with a master hand.

"He swept the lyre, and nations heard,
Responsive to the godlike thrill!"

Or if it wasn't quite so bad as that, it was at least fully as well meant, and the only native American harpist did his level best, which is no less than the best man in the world can do; and it is even doubtful if any one else could have done as well under the extraordinary and oven-like circumstances of the occasion.

The harping landlord not only played but sang.

He had his wife bring him bottles of beer on demand; and thence on, with only such interruptions as were caused by renewing his guest's dose and whetting his own gullet, vocal and instrumental music, foreign or domestic, full, vibrant and prolonged, rushed from his inspired throat and hands in a scarcely broken river of enthusiastic melody.

The last thing that the ex-police detective was conscious of was a roaring of tempestuous concords, combined with a feeble attempt to ingurgitate yet one more hot whisky and quinine (a favorite police remedy, by the way) with the assistance of the landlord's wife's supporting arm.

After that there was a heavy, a protracted and perspiring blank.

He crawled out of bed next morning at eight o'clock, with the chills knocked endwise, to use his own expression, but with an odd thirst in his diaphragm and a general sensation of having been parboiled and then rubbed down with a brick.

"My friend," said he, grasping the amiable landlord by the hand, "you're a perfect trump, and I shall never forget you."

"Gad! sir, but I'll never forget you, depend on it, nor last night either," was the hearty reply. "It was like a Turkish bath in an opera house!"

Fortunately for himself, Springsteel was very hungry, and he felt almost himself again after the excellent breakfast that had been prepared for him.

Then, paying Mr. Blake's very reasonable charges, he was most happy to hire a turnout from the landlord's stable, and proceed on his homeward way.

By a lucky chance, it happened that he reached the manse at the very moment when O'Meara, with his constables in the background, was making the demand for his pound of flesh, as it might be called.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CHARGE AND COUNTER-CHARGE.

Now that the dreaded ordeal was come, Edna, no less than her husband, had assumed a calm and contemptuous demeanor in the face of Red O'Meara's approach.

The latter's anxiety, however, was plainly observable through his external implacableness as he mounted the piazza steps.

"Edgar Willard, alias Frank Harper," said he, "you will perceive that I have left my supporters in the background, in order to give you a last remaining chance."

"You have got your trouble for your pains, you unspeakably accursed hound!" was Willard's calm response. "Whatever temporary inconvenience or disgrace your baffled malice may subject me to has already been provided for."

Whatsoever defiance he might have expected to find persisted in, it was evident that O'Meara was secretly disappointed.

"Inconvenience? disgrace?" he repeated.

"Why, man alive, it is a hanging matter!"

"Undoubtedly—for yourself, sooner or later."

"Are you so insane as to defy me to this very last?"

"On the contrary, I am so healthily sane as to do so."

"Your danger will not end with the bare charge of having murdered your grandfather, young man! There will be yet another eyewitness than myself to support it—if you persist in forcing me to make it."

"Dispatch your business, if you please! A child-stealing, woman-duping criminal blackguard is not the sort of society that is agreeable to our nostrils."

"You will not do well to brave it out!"

"Dispatch, I say!"

"But, Willard, this is simply suicidal—noting but suicidal!"

"Certainly—for you."

"I'm not without mercy so much as you suppose. I have even decided to abate my demand."

"A novel sort of Shylock, truly!"

"Yes; I'll accept a paltry ten thousand, instead of twenty."

"Cents or dollars?" with ironical earnestness. "Let there be no confusion of terms, I beg of you."

"This seemingly defiant role, while you are in reality quaking in your shoes, shall avail you nothing. Or if you are so obtuse to your own interests, perhaps your young wife here—"

He was interrupted by Willard spitting in his face.

"Curse you!" roared O'Meara, reeling back, convulsed with fury; "that shall cost you your life on the scaffold! Come on here, you fellows!" turning with a violent gesture toward the waiting officials; "arrest this man! He is a murderer!"

But the last words had issued less confidently from his enraged lips.

The constables had already begun to advance along the drive, and they were closely followed by Sheriff Langley, who was talking confidentially with a man, in an unfamiliar turnout, whose bent head prevented his instant recognition.

The fact should have been mentioned, indeed, that Springsteel had borrowed an old slouched hat from the landlord of the Crystal Springs Hotel, his own having been hopelessly battered beyond resuscitation, and this in a great degree assisted his oddness of appearance at the present moment.

But O'Meara had quickly recovered his insolent assurance, in which there was now an admixture of no little desperateness, apart from the personal insult under which he was smarting.

"Arrest this man!" he continued. "He murdered his grandfather, Miser John Willard, over five years ago! I myself was a witness to the savage, deed, and have only this far held my peace out of respect—out of—"

He had come to a staggering pause by reason of the old detective at this moment lifting his bowed face and revealing his identity.

"My father!" cried Edna, with a joyous sense of relief. "Oh! thank God you are here at last!"

O'Meara had reeled back, with his eyeballs almost starting out of his head as he gazed at the detective, but he was making a tremendous effort to recover his sang froid.

"Look at him!" coolly remarked the old detective, pointing menacingly at the confused scoundrel, while slowly alighting. "Look at him, for he may still think me dead—dead at the bottom of Wampus Pond, with his assassin bullet in my heart."

"'Tis false—false as hell!" exclaimed O'Meara, having completed his self-mastery. "Where and what is Wampus Pond? The man is crazy!"

"Oh, fear not but that everything I say shall be substantiated, Mr. Lawrence O'Meara," continued Springsteel, with increased coolness. "I have been telling my story here to Sheriff Jake. He knows that I ought to be lying where my son-in-law's best horse is lying at this moment—dead in the lake, at your hands—if luck and Providence had not befriended me. It is a

Providence, my man, that has already got you well in hand—the Nemesis that has you well-nigh hunted down."

O'Meara burst into a scornful laugh.

"Bay Charley dead!" exclaimed Edgar, with a groan.

Springsteel nodded.

"Ay, my boy; dynamited down the mountain-side by that scoundrel and his confederates, whither I was sent plunging a few minutes later, with a suppositiously fatal bullet in my breast."

"Oh, this is too absurd," laughed O'Meara.

"Officers, do your duty. Here is your man!" and he laid his hand heavily on Edgar's shoulder, whence, however, it was shudderingly cast off with a loathing gesture. "He is the murderer of his grandfather, Miser John Willard, on my accusation, as that of an eye-witness of the crime. And yet another witness shall be forthcoming."

But the constables, looking no little bewildered, remained where they were, glancing askance at the sheriff.

"What's it all about, Jake?" demanded the detective. "Are you bossing this preposterous arrest of my son-in-law at that cheap-jack scoundrel's instance?"

"He's got nothing to do with it—at least, not till later on, when like enough his hanging services will be in order," cried O'Meara, fast losing his temper again. "Here," producing a paper, "is the justice's warrant, sworn out by me this very morning."

"It may be more my business than you imagine; and now, Mr. Count Omeerando," interposed the sheriff. "And don't be too sure as to whom my hanging services may first be in order upon."

O'Meara bit his lip and glared.

"You see," continued Langley, turning to the detective, "I heard of his having sworn out the ridiculous arrest warrant, and, though he had secured the services of these officers of mine ahead of me, I thought I would just drop over this way after them, and see that things were regulated."

"Thank you, Mr. Langley," said Edna, sweetly, while her husband nodded his appreciation.

"Oh, this is too much of a farce," cried O'Meara, with a coarse oath. "What's the good of a warrant, if it is not served on sight?"

"Perhaps it's because there may be a counter-charge," shouted Springsteel Steve, with sudden vehemence. "I make such a charge now! Lawrence, alias Red, O'Meara, I charge you with the murder that you would foist upon Edgar Willard to save your own blood-stained carcass! The murder of Miser John Willard, known to criminal fame for the past five years or more as the Bleak Hollow Mystery!"

The counter-charge was made with stern and impressive effect.

Nearly all the house-servants had by this time been attracted to the scene, the sensation among them being better imagined than described.

O'Meara had once more started back, but his confusion was only momentary.

"I should not be surprised at this," said he, with an effort at dignified and scornful calmness. "The counter-charge is ever the specious wrap-rascal of the consciously guilty criminal."

And he pointed contemptuously at Edgar, whose composed and almost smiling demeanor made the action on the part of his enemy particularly incongruous.

"You're a shallower knave than I gave you credit for, O'Meara," said Springsteel, with resumed calmness. "You ought at least to know me of old."

"That I do, and little to your good, common and decrepit old sleuth-hound that you are!" was the impudent response. "But blood will tell—I shouldn't blame you for trying to bolster up your daughter's husband, with the gallows staring him in the face."

Springsteel laughed his low, significant laugh.

"As if I would attempt a counter-charge," he muttered, half-aloud, "and in a case of murder, too, without evidence to back me!"

"You have no evidence against me!" exclaimed O'Meara, but with a lack of confidence that his boisterous manner could not wholly mask. "I defy you to produce any!"

"Villain, it is here! Behold!" and the old detective's voice was once more a voice of thunder, as he flashed the tell-tale red morocco pocket-book into view.

This time the villain's agitation was most apparent. He staggered back, as if blinded by a terrific and yet half-expected lightning-flash, and it was only by the most painful effort that he seemed to gather himself together again.

"Behold!" continued Springsteel, triumphantly. "It is your wallet, bearing your initials, crowded with papers in your name, as damning documentary evidence against you!"

"False, false, false! I never saw the thing before," was all that O'Meara could at first stammer in his defense.

"It was this telltale wallet that came into the possession of Thomas Simmons, one of your accomplices in the murder of Miser John Willard, five years ago!" continued Springsteel, with colder but yet more deadly emphasis. "It was

to obtain this from me (aha! but you knew the vital, the fatal danger to yourself of its remaining in my possession!) that you and your three confederates attempted my assassination last evening on the Whippoorwill road! It is *this*—look, murderer, look!" and he shook the pocketbook once more aloft—it is this that shall hang you yet!"

O'Meara seemed to lose his head altogether for an instant.

With a fierce oath, he made a bound to snatch the wallet, but was intercepted in a manner he could hardly have looked for.

CHAPTER XL.

TURNING THE TABLES.

THE unexpected interception was in the form of a knock-down blow between the eyes from Edgar Willard's fist.

It was cleverly delivered, with surprising celerity and expertness, and before the floored scoundrel could more than stagger to his feet, Sheriff Langley had slipped a pair of handcuffs on him with commendable neatness and dispatch.

Edna had only flushed with pleasure, while her father nodded his approbation of the pugilistic surprise; but both Patrick, the coachman, and Albert, the colossal gardener, burst into an unmistakable cheer, while the female domestics clapped their hands without restraint.

Even the fact of poor Mary's dead body lying up-stairs was momentarily forgotten in the enthusiasm of seeing their young master acquit himself so unexpectedly and creditably.

"Hooray for Misther Willard!" shouted the coachman. "Give him just one more, sor, for the honor of the house! Sure, an' isn't that the dirthy blackguard that stole the baby, an' did our poor Mary to the death?"

The applause of the domestics turned to fury, and there was a demonstrative movement against the prisoner, which was, however, instantly checked by a gesture on the part of both master and mistress.

"You dare not arrest me without a warrant," cried the ruffian, glaring like a baffled wild beast. "Release me, or produce your arrest warrant. Otherwise, I'll have the law on you!"

Springsteel slightly lost countenance, for there was more truth than empty bravado in this; but Sheriff Langley was provided for this emergency.

"Not so fast, my noble count!" said he, quietly producing a document. "I kinder thought an extra warrant wouldn't be amiss in your aristocratic case, so I provided a double-shotter, on my own responsibility, before quitting White Plains this morning."

"On what charge would you dare arrest me?"

"On two charges, my beauty! First, on Farmer Webb's charge of having stolen his money on the night of your elopement. As the warrant says nothing about your stealing his daughter at the same time, I suppose he's willing to let her slide, as being very much of age, and big enough to take care of herself."

O'Meara, who had now got his unruly temper in hand again, burst into a disdainful laugh.

"This is too ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "The theft, if any, was the young woman's, not mine."

Langley waved his hand in a mock deprecating way.

"Next, on Mr. and Mrs. Willard's charge of kidnapping their infant and his nurse."

"You must add also the charge of causing the nurse's death," called out Edna, before O'Meara could interpose a second denial. "The poor girl died last night—the victim of that villain's brutal contriving, if there ever was such a thing in the world."

Here there was another demonstration, on the part of the servants, which was suppressed with more difficulty than before.

"That preposterous charge again!" roared O'Meara. "Why, I've already proved the absurdity of it!"

"That remains to be seen," said the sheriff, whose team, a large spring wagon with two horses, had just been driven up to the piazza. "At present, young man, I want you bad. Come along!"

"Isn't he to be arrested?" shouted the discomfited scoundrel, fairly quivering with rage as he pointed to Willard. "Is the sworn charge of murder against him to be honeyfugled out of sight and existence in this way?"

Edgar, whose hat had been brought to him, had already stepped smilingly between the two constables.

"Oh, the warrant will have to be executed for form's sake, I suppose," replied Langley, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "But these little ornaments can be readily dispensed with in Mr. Willard's case," and he tapped O'Meara's handcuffs with jocose significance. "Come along, your Highness!"

But O'Meara underwent another frightful access of rage at finding the tables so absolutely and ignominiously turned upon him.

Coming at the mouth, he stiffened up his short but powerful frame, and menacingly shook his manacled hands aloft.

"I'll be cursed if I do!" he shouted, with a torrent of blasphemy. "Curse it all, it isn't

the fair thing! You cover me with shame on the merest pretense, while that white-handed, equally accused man, simply because he's got money and position—Stand back, Langley, or I'll brain you with my ironed wrists! I'm a desperate man, and—"

At that instant he was borne down by a giant hand—belonging to the colossal Albert, but seeming at the moment as large and heavy as the proverbial hand of Providence itself—falling upon his shoulder with crushing force.

Then the great Swiss seemed to fairly tie the ruffian up in a knot with the most phlegmatic ease, in spite of his oaths and struggles, after which the wretch was tossed into the wagon with such summariness that he could only remain there, impotently glaring and gnashing his teeth.

"Thanks, my friend," said the sheriff, politely bowing his acknowledgments, while taking his seat beside his deputy. "I rather think we shall get on now."

Patrick, the coachman, who had celebrated the feat of his Swiss co-laborer with a mild shindig of delight, drew mysteriously close to his master.

"Say but the wurrd, sor," he whispered, indicating the country constables by a motion of the thumb, "an' ye sha'n't even go to the Plains with these shpalpeens. Albert an' meself will break the back av thim in the shake of a sheep's tail."

"Don't forget yourself, Patrick!" said Willard, reprovingly. "Even Albert's interference was uncalled for."

He then pressed Edna's hand, and signified his readiness to accompany the officers.

"One moment before you drive off, Jake!" called out Springsteel, stepping down to the sheriff's wagon. "A parting word for the benefit of your amiable prisoner here."

And he smilingly turned to O'Meara who had gathered himself into some sort of shape after his unceremonious tumble, and was occupying the rear seat in the wagon with a species of sulky resignation.

"What more do you want of me?" growled the ruffian, with a fresh oath.

"Only to tell you this, my boy," was the now thoroughly good-natured response. "You spoke, I understand, of being able to produce a second eye-witness to the murder of Miser John Willard—meaning, doubtless, your former accomplice in the Bleak Hollow job, Tom Simmons, the sailor?"

"What if I did?"

"Nothing; only that, while you are in durance vile, my boy, I shall be hunting him up in New York, with the view to producing him as a witness on our side. See? There's nothing like being beforehand in matters of business, my boy; and I thought you might want to know. By-by!"

O'Meara could only scowl as he was driven off; and Willard was not far behind in the nominal custody of the constables, who had left their conveyance around the turn of the drive.

"Well, my dear," said the old detective, cheerfully kissing his daughter, as he hustled indoors with her a few moments later. "The great and much-dreaded agony is over at last, you see, and without a great deal of harm done, after all."

"Yes, thanks to your opportune return," replied Edna, who was by this time in almost a cheerful state of resignation herself. "Oh, what a narrow escape you must have had! and how odd your clothes look!"

"So would yours, if you had taken a header in Wampus Pond, without the preliminary of undressing. But I'll tell you all about it at lunch, after I get myself in better shape. Send up some hot water to my room, please, and have Patrick make the barouche or Surrey ready by half-past twelve."

"What for?" cried Edna, who had followed him to the door of his room. "You're not going away right off again?"

"Only to New York, that's all. And of course you'll accompany me as far as the station, to see how Edgar is surviving the clutches of the myrmidons of the law, as the story-tellers are so fond of styling us poor devils of the baton and shield. Ah, I thought so! Run along, then, and send me the hot water."

He duly recounted the story of his adventure at luncheon, and, half an hour later, after much other conversation had passed between them, they were on their way to the White Plains station, with Patrick at the lines.

"Do you apprehend that you will have any trouble in finding the man Simmons, father?" inquired Edna.

"Yes, more or less; but I'll find him, my dear. No doubt of that."

"But if he is sick to death in a hospital, what trouble can there be in finding him at all?"

"In the first place, my love, because he may not have been *quite* so sick to the death as he made out; and then again, on broader and abstruser principles, he is a sailor."

"What of that?"

"Sailors are convivial, my dear. But let this rest now. I shall bring the rascal out in time for Edgar's preliminary examination before the grand jury, which ought to take place prompt-

ly, as Langley told me it was now in session—that is, I think I shall. In the mean time, Edgar can procure bail in any amount, so that neither you nor he need be especially inconvenienced in my absence."

Springsteel was just in time to catch his desired train, so that Edna could only kiss him good-by, and then hurry off to the Court House where it was understood that both her husband and O'Meara were in custody.

While making her way through the crowded court room, under Sheriff Langley's escort, a towering and voluminous beauty spoke to her.

It was Miss Libby.

"What, you here, Miss Libby?" exclaimed Edna, greatly astonished.

"The Countess Omeerando now, if you please!" corrected the mighty damsel, with a grand air. "Here is my card."

CHAPTER XLI.

IN COURT.

EDNA only glanced at the card extended to her, and then hurried on.

"Even as it is, I do hope that she has not really married the man!" she whispered to Langley, who had passed Libby with merely a cold stare.

"Oh, but she has; there is no doubt of it," was his reply. "They were married in New York two or three days ago, I understand, and she has been trying to get word with him here since he was first brought here. And the joke of it is she still persists in imagining herself nothing less than a countess."

But Edna could see no joke in it, whatever, and could only silently grieve over the self-wrought degradation of the foolish young woman whom she had once regarded as her friend.

The examination was almost finished with regard to Edgar, who turned from the side of his counsel, one of the most eminent lawyers of the county, to respond with a smile to the cheering pressure of his wife's hand.

O'Meara's charge of murder against the young master of Willard Manse, which had already caused the wildest public sensation, was duly considered by the Court, after which he was admitted to bail in the sum of ten thousand dollars, to appear before the Grand Jury on the second day following.

His bondsmen were on hand—Mr. W—, his counsel, had taken care of that—and in a few moments Edgar was at liberty.

Both he and Edgar waited, however, to see the action that would be taken in O'Meara's case.

The latter had also managed to secure the services of capable counsel, who at once undertook to pooh-pooh the charges made against his client, as having been solely inspired by a spirit of spiteful reprisal.

But Sheriff Langley had already had the ear of the district attorney, an intelligent and discriminating man; and, moreover, Farmer Webb himself was present, with blood in his eye and revenge in every square inch of his personal appearance.

The judge summarily disposed of the case by holding the accused in ten thousand dollars on the countercharge, and in five thousand each on the associate charges of robbery and kidnapping.

Then the prisoner's counsel entreated that the bail might be reduced so as to be within the reach of his client, whom he feelingly alluded to as "a comparatively penniless man, with few personal friends within the jurisdiction of the Court, and so unfortunate as to have incurred the rancorous resentment of the powerful and wealthy criminal whom he had dared to charge with a heinous and barbarous crime, the murder of John Willard, of Willard Manse, five years ago, but still fresh in the shuddering recollection of a justly indignant public."

The appeal was useless, however, and, in default of bail, the prisoner was sent to prison, to await the action of the grand jury.

O'Meara had resigned himself to the discomfort of his predicament, and was putting the best face on the matter.

He was creditably assuming the deeply-injured but heroically-resigned part, and turned with an affectedly crushed and virtuous look to accept his counsel's outstretched hand before being led away to his confinement.

But at this juncture there was an awkward and most unexpected interruption.

There was an emotional scream, like the blast of a locomotive.

"Count! my husband!" shrieked the voice; "they shall not separate us. Your countess-bride is with you still."

And the whilom Miss Libby was seen shouldering her way through the intervening crowd, like the fistic champion Sullivan amid a mob of dandies and dandies for the gate-money.

Her monstrous and absurdly over-dressed figure—for, brief as had been her allotted time, she had somehow managed to achieve wonders from among the New York milliners and dress-making emporiums—surged and undulated amid her pigmy surroundings, like a frigate in a mill-pond.

Her arms were waving frantically, emotional

frenzy was in her flushed face, and all gave way or went down before her.

"Bring an ox-chain—hold that gal back!" shouted Farmer Webb, excitedly. "I've forgiven her—don't let her throw herself away on that red-headed sucker!"

As well plead to restrain a whirlwind with a straw, a white squall with a kerchief.

O'Meara had shrunk back, with a muttered oath, among his guards, but the next moment he was squirming and floundering in her mammoth embrace.

He was no more than a doomed lap-dog in a tempestuous sea of fuss and feathers.

The excitement of the spectators was both sympathetic and uproarious.

"Give him a show for his life!" yelled one.

"Let him breathe!" vociferated another.

"Where's the weddin' papers?" bawled a third.

Then there was a howl of laughter, and poor Libby, who had ever been more or less of a butt on the country-side by reason of her extreme size and ponderosity, was handled without gloves, as the saying goes.

"I'm his bride—his countess!" she screamed. "I'm his'n and he's mine! Only death shall part us!"

The release of the hapless adventurer, however, was at last effected, and he was led away, cursing audibly and looking half-squeezed to death.

Farmer Webb had sternly followed in the broad wake of his only and erring offspring through the crowd.

"Here, young woman, I want you!" he exclaimed, authoritatively. "So does your ma. All's forgiven, and you're wanted to hum."

Libby had collapsed, a palpitating mountain of silks and ribbons, into three or four chairs.

"Never, pa, never!" she cried, determinedly. "He's my count, and I'm his countess. I'll never desert him, now that misfortun' has rolled over his lofty head—never!"

"Lofty fiddlesticks! Can't ye see what every one else sees, that he's a shyster an' a sneak, you fool—besides stealin' my money? Come along to hum, I say!"

It was only after considerable more coaxing, however, that the scandalized farmer succeeded in leading her away.

Neither Edna nor her husband had been able to smile at the scene, which was especially painful to the former.

"I do hope they won't let the poor, foolish woman come to town again!" she exclaimed, when they were driving away. "She has ruined her whole life. But I suppose that horrible man's fate will be decided before long."

"I hope so," was her husband's response.

But, to her surprise, he spoke in a more despondent way than his assured manner in the court-room had led her to expect.

"Why, love, don't you know it?" she said, looking with ill-concealed alarm into his troubled face. "You cannot still have any anxieties as to your own position?"

"My dear Edna," he replied, with much earnestness, "it is well not to be too sure of the future. And Mr. W—, to whom I have unbosomed myself unreservedly, though he has no particle of doubt of extricating me in the end, is not so sanguine of immediate triumph."

"You told him everything?"

"Unreservedly, not only as to my entire past, but also as to recent happenings in connection with my controversies with O'Meara."

"Was that in accordance with the policy of silence you had determined on, at my father's advice?"

"It wasn't in opposition to it, so far as the public are concerned. A man in law-trouble should keep back nothing from his lawyer, and Mr. W— is no less eminent for his conscientiousness than for his ability."

"But what can Mr. W— fear for you?"

"Only possible trouble and embarrassment, that is all. He thinks that O'Meara, with his counsel's help, may cause me trouble at the preliminary trial, and perhaps, for the time being at least, change the whole current of public opinion against me."

"But how?"

"Well, he argues, from the kidnapping case and the mysterious assaults that have been made on your father, that O'Meara must still have cunning, powerful and devoted confederates, who will be likely to come to his support. Then O'Meara's story will naturally have the first hearing, you know, as his accusation must take precedence over mine, which may be thus made to appear as a mere bluff."

"I cannot think so. That O'Meara has recently had confederates stands to reason, but they cannot be other than coarse adventurers and ruffians, like himself."

"Mr. W— fears not."

"What other sort of confederates could they be, and what does Mr. W— think?"

"You know the mysterious series of garrotings, masked robberies and similar crimes that have spread up northward along the Hudson from New York during the past year or so?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Mr. W— is of the opinion that they are the work of a powerful organization of

criminals, with money and intelligence at their back."

"Well?"
It is with this criminal organization that he thinks O'Meara has probably associated himself. If its leaders should think him worth the trouble and expense, both money and influence would be secretly exerted in his behalf."

"But, what would these avail, considering O'Meara's horrible past record, as recently evidenced by his kidnapping our child and his felonious elopement escapade?"

"Nothing, I hope. But those things will be an after-consideration. Everything will hinge at the outset on the Bleak Hollow Mystery."

Edna drew a long breath.

"I can but think that all these gloomy fore-shadings are purely imaginary," she said, decidedly.

"Let us hope they may prove so."

"But they must! Of course, Mr. W— knows of my father's intention of producing the sailor Simmons?"

"Yes."

"How does he regard that?"

"Hopefully. But, there is one witness whose production he is confident would at once dispose of O'Meara and dismember me."

"Ah! and that witness?"

"The murdered man's double—the mysterious twin."

"Ah! he too believes in the double?"

"Yes; and he is deeply interested."

"Interested?"

"Yes. It appears that Mr. W—'s father, who was a lawyer before him, once told his son when a mere boy that there was some sort of mystery concerning a twin at Willard Manse."

"Come, Edgar; this is something like authenticating the double."

"Yes; though they were only old country-side rumors."

"But to what effect?"

"Well, it seems that when my grandfather was a mere child, there was some talk about a crazy or idiotic twin brother being kept in rigid seclusion at the manse. My grandfather might have inherited the care of him, you know, which would explain the use of that cell-like strong room adjoining his sleeping apartment."

"Ah, yes; and on which poor Miss Raw could have shed so much enlightenment. By the way, may not her murder be eventually brought home to O'Meara?"

"Langley thinks so, and is still on the lookout for circumstantial evidence against him, though I scarcely think with any success as yet."

"Oh, but that will come out, too! I feel certain of it. My darling, you must try to share my hopefulness."

"Well, I will try."

And he silently pressed her hand.

"It is simply against common-sense," Edna went on, energetically, "to suppose that you can still be in danger from the accusations of such a man as O'Meara, who is already, or so it seems to me, fairly overwhelmed by the crimes that are being heaped to his charge."

On the following day was poor Mary's funeral, and on the day after that Edgar appeared for examination, with no little fresh anxiety on the part of Edna, for not another word had as yet been received from her father.

CHAPTER XLII.

A SEARCH.

On reaching the hospital in which Sailor Tom Simmons was supposed to be lying at death's door, Springsteel Steve was not immensely surprised at being informed that the alleged moribund was no longer there.

"He managed to get out of his ward and take himself off surreptitiously several days ago," said the superintendent, "and we're glad of it."

"Not a very desirable patient, perhaps?"

"Desirable? Why, even for a sailor, he was the champion dead beat! He'd steal kerosene for drink, if he couldn't get anything better, and he outwore the whole ward with his lying yarns and his blasphemy."

"Very sick?"

"Yes, all broke up. However, he's tough—all these sailors are—and he managed to give us the slip and crawl off."

"Where would I be likely to hunt him up now, do you think?"

"Oh, doubtless in any of the rum-holes along South street, or thereabouts—in almost any slum furnishing cheap whisky and playing-cards, for the rascal had a few dollars in his clothes, and was as hot for gambling as for rum."

"Rather a poor lookout for intelligent witness-making material!" thought the old detective to himself, as he set out upon his search for the erratic mariner.

With an ordinary man, it would have been very like the proverbial search for a needle in a bottle of hay.

But our detective was a man of many wiles and vast experience, and he finally, about nightfall, run his man to earth in a low Water street drinking-den, where he was boozing over a glass that was kept replenished by a careworn, paint-streaked slattern, in supposed Turkish

costume, and playing cards with several sailors and bummers.

The old detective seated himself unobtrusively, ordered and paid for something which he was wisely careful not to drink, and fell to studying his man at leisure.

An ordinary seafarer, prematurely aged with dissipation and disease, and with certain lines of cunning mixed up with the desperate recklessness of his pallid, dare-devil face.

Such was the son of Neptune under special consideration.

His companions were of his own class, and no less debased, with the exception of one man, who sat rather contemptuously eying the game, but with his chief interest evidently centered in Tom Simmons.

The detective honored this fellow with a more than cursory examination.

He was rough-clad, beetle-browed and evil-faced, but with a more intelligent air of calculating cunning and viciousness than was in exact keeping with his squalid surroundings.

"Oho, my beauty! where have I seen you before?" thought Springsteel. "Now, on the supposition of O'Meara having joined that criminal organization that continues to so puzzle the police, how well you might be his advance-agent in looking after our sailor-witness there, to keep him from testifying on the wrong side! But we shall see."

Simmons finally pushed back the cards, declaring that he was broke, if not cheated, and would play no more.

"Another grog, you jade!" he exclaimed, turning his glass disgustedly upside-down to illustrate its emptiness.

"The last one isn't paid for yet, Tom," said the woman.

A true sailor oath interrupted by a violent cough, was on the sailor's lips, when the better-appearing scoundrel—his temporary evil-genius, as he might be called—shoved a dollar over the table to him, with a short laugh.

"Take a cartwheel, Tom," said he. "And don't stop playing either, if you don't feel like it."

The spendthrift grasped the coin, but at this juncture the old detective stepped over and smilingly tapped him on the shoulder.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Tom Timmins-Simmons," said he, persuasively. "And I rather think I can make it your interest to talk to me."

The sailor had looked with a scowl and a start at the doubtless long unfamiliar Timmins-Simmons combination, but before he could reply the sinister on-looker angrily interposed.

"What old freshy is this, Tom?" the latter demanded, peering with insolent suspicion into the detective's face.

"How the devil should I know?" replied the sailor, impatiently. "Shiver my timbers if I know him from a deck-swab!"

"Then," still more menacingly, "what the thunder does he mean by presuming to meddle with you now? By Heaven! if I thought—"

He came to a startled pause, his jaw dropping, and his evil face assuming a scared, uneasy expression, as if caught from something new and illuminative that had suddenly crept into the veteran detective's penetrating gaze.

"Holy smoke! if it ain't old Springsteel himself!" was the gasping filling out of the uncompleted threat.

"So, Black Jerry, we meet once more, and you are not quite hanged yet!" said the old detective, in his composed but fear-inspiring tone.

"Yes; but so help me, Springsteel, I can't be wanted for anything now! Besides, it was generally thought you were clean off the force, and—"

"Clear the room!" with a contemptuous gesture that included the three other card-players like so many marionettes. "And it's for me to say whether you're wanted or not, you scoundrel!"

A hurried gesture on the fellow's part was sufficient to clear the inner den in which they were sitting, not only of the loafers, but also of the nondescript woman-attendant, though the detective first ordered a full bottle of spirits for the special edification of the ruined sailor, and then they were alone.

"Now, Mr. Black Jerry, explain yourself!" said Springsteel, in his sharp, brusque way.

"I'm on the honest lay, I swear I am, Springsteel!" was the uneasy response. "I haven't anything to explain."

"You are a liar!" The detective's sharp little eyes had become like red-hot gimlets. "Trifle with me at your peril!"

"Well," with a muttered oath, "what is there I can tell you?"

"Everything that I demand, and the penalty shall rest with yourself—with your frankness. You understand!"

Black Jerry thrust his hands in his pockets, while his chin sunk on his breast with a resigned air.

"Cut away, then!" he growled.

The sailor had, in the mean time, looked on with an expression of mingled cunning, bewilderment and desperateness in his worn, reckless face; and he now poured off and swal-

lowed a huge bumper, which seemed to brighten him up rather than otherwise, though he still abstained from taking part in the colloquy.

"You have once more joined fortunes with Red O'Meara!" said Springsteel, still riveting Black Jerry with his boring gaze.

Black Jerry moved uneasily in his seat.

"Not exactly that, Springsteel; though I have seen him occasionally of late."

"Be careful! It was doubtless you that introduced him to the masked garroting and house-breaking gang who have been depredating up through Westchester, Rockland and Putman counties so successfully during the past year or more."

Black Jerry began to protest to the contrary, but with a confirmatory uneasiness that was not lost upon the experienced detective, who, having premised so fortunately thus far, was perfectly willing to pursue his advantage.

"Don't try to deny me in what I know!" he menacingly continued, though in reality knowing nothing more than he was forcing out upon a purely conjectural basis.

"Well, but—"

"Shut up! You"—it was all or nothing now—"were O'Meara's assistant in the abduction of the nurse and child!"

It was a random stroke, but that it had struck home was evident in the man's increased consternation, which he strove in vain to dissemble.

"Deny nothing, and, so far as you are concerned, punishment shall be escaped. Refuse to testify to the truth at my bidding, and—"

"Oh, I sha'n't be squeamish in giving old Reddy away on that job," declared the scoundrel, after drawing a long breath. "He hasn't done the square thing with me, any how."

"Good enough! You are now here scraping this man's acquaintance and favor in O'Meara's interest."

"It's the truth."

"Give me your address, and be prepared to go with me and testify as to all you know at an hour's warning. You shall have not only immunity, but a reward. Defy me at your peril!"

"My God, I don't intend to, Springsteel!" and the scoundrel rose to go. "Here," scribbling something on a card and handing it over, "is where I'm always to be found—almost any time, night or day."

"Wait! Where is this man roosting?"

"I've swung my hammock next door at the Mariner's Paradise, old hunks!" cried the sailor, speaking for himself, and tossing off another bumper. "What's that to you, my hearty?"

"Nothing, my man, save that I shall pass the night with you!" returned the old detective, slapping him on the back. "Come along, sailor! There shall be all you can drink or guzzle in the mean time. As for you, Black Jerry, you may get word from me soon."

CHAPTER XLIII.

TEM PERED STEEL.

SPRINGSTEEL took the sailor out with him, treated him to the best and squarest meal that he had probably enjoyed for many a day, afloat or ashore, and then retired with him, in high good humor, to the best double room in the capacity of the Mariner's Paradise, which was about as decent a one as an ordinary sailor's boarding-house could afford.

Due explanations had been made in the old detective's most persuasive style; Simmons was full of the idea of going back to his parents with some money in his pocket; there was plenty of the species of cheer (chiefly alcoholic) especially dear to his sea-faring heart to last the night out if necessary; and everything was in order for the detective keeping his man fast.

"It's all right, shipmate!" cried the sailor, settling himself down to his unexpected symposium. "Feed me on this sort of gruel, and I'll stick to you while you've a plank above water. That's your sort, my hearty."

"All I ask is for you to swear to the truth as to the actual murderer of the old man at the manse," said the detective. "That is, that the blow was, as you say, struck by O'Meara himself, against the protestations of Black and yourself, and before the entrance of Frank Harper upon the scene by the back stair."

"That's the solid truth, my hearty, as the Supreme Pilot is my witness!" said Simmons, taking a drink. "But, mind you, I'm not to be jugged myself, or in any way piped on deck for punishment?"

"I'll manage that for you."

"And the young gentleman what's in trouble is to come down handsome with the prize money, besides keepin' a kindly sort o' weather eye on my old folks in the future?"

"You shall have no reason to complain of Mr. Willard's generosity; I can promise you that."

"Crack on canvas then, and hey for blue water, shipmate! Why the devil don't you splice the main brace?" and Simmons drank again, the embodiment of care-free and devil-may-care recklessness. "You don't know what is good and glorious."

"Perhaps not. But aren't you afraid of drinking so much yourself?"

"Not a bit of it!" with a repetition of his

hacking cough. "Shipmate, I don't hoodwink myself. I know I'm gunwale-deep in the breakers, with my port breathing-valve scupper-choked, and even my jury sail blown to rags. But under the circumstances, this drink is the last breath of life to me; you'll notice that it braces instead of dazing me."

That this was at least apparently true, the detective could not doubt.

"By the way," he said, after a pause, "you haven't told me how you came by O'Meara's red pocketbook, which you left with your old folks."

The sailor burst into a laugh.

"It's that I stole it from him at the last moment!" he cried.

"How was that?"

"It was this way, shipmate. You see, after three of us went off, leaving Harper and the young lady in the Hollow, we only drove off a short distance as a blind."

"Aha!"

"Yes; and when sure the pair of 'em had skipped, we stole back into the Hollow, dug up the old man again, and planted him a second time away up at the top of a little rocky path."

"Didn't you have hard work digging the second grave?"

"Work? Thunder and lightning! it was like the fifth day at the pumps, with a fresh breach making once an hour. If Nature hadn't helped us out a bit with a sort of deep bunk, ready scooped to our hands by the winds and rains of years at the big rock's base, we'd have never made that second trench in the world. But we got the old gentleman once more comfortable at last."

"Well; as to the pocketbook."

"I snaked it out of O'Meara's keeping just after we had made the final settling five miles away from the Hollow. He had put on so many quarterdeck airs that I thought it a good rig to get on him at last. Then the three of us separated, and I went on up Whippoorwill-way for a last good-by before tripping anchor. But dash my binnacle-light, shipmate!" turning the bottle upside-down; "there's not a drop of grog in the locker, and I'm thirstier than a smoked herring on the coals."

Springsteel ordered another bottle; and continued to humor the fellow's superlative demand for drink till he fell asleep in his chair.

Then he helped him to one of the couches, took possession of the other without undressing, blew out the lamp, and went to sleep with the intention of proceeding to White Plains betimes on the following morning, with both Tom Simmons and Black Jerry in tow.

But not a day or night passes without enforcing the proverbial truth that man but proposes, while God disposes.

At daybreak the old detective was awakened by a super-heated and half-suffocating sensation.

He sprung to his feet to find the room full of smoke, with an occasional lurid reflection flashing up before the windows, which were on the fourth floor, fronting the street.

The lodging-house was on fire!

Springsteel congratulated himself that he hadn't undressed.

Then he sprung to the adjoining bed, and shook its occupant, who was in a drunken and snoring lethargy, but not with much success.

"Wake up, man!" the detective fairly belied in the sleeper's ear. "The house is on fire!"

Already there was a hubbub in the street, while screams and hurrying footsteps began to echo throughout the adjoining rooms and corridors.

Finding it impossible to awaken his companion, and determined not to lose his valuable company at any price, Springsteel at last threw the man's slight figure over his shoulder, and started for the door.

But he had no sooner opened it than a volleying gust of flame and smoke sent him staggering back, when he was only too glad to shut it again in temporary self-defense.

Then he rushed to the windows, already partly curtained by filmy curtains of flame lapping up from the next floor below.

But he succeeded in attracting the attention of some of the firemen in the street.

"It is Springsteel Steve!" shouted a clear voice from among the crowd. "Up with that ladder, boys!"

In the nick of time, a fire ladder was run up, and the old detective, together with his unconscious burden, assisted to the street.

Then there was a crash, a crumbling roar, a blinding stroke, and Springsteel knew no more.

The brave old veteran had been stricken senseless by a flying fragment from the falling front wall.

When he recovered, it was in a hospital ward, with the dawn of a new day struggling through the windows, and kindly figures grouping about his bed.

He was weak, but with his thoughts perfectly collected, and his first thought was one of painful apprehension with regard to his son-in-law's examination at White Plains.

"What day is it—the day of the week?" he demanded, sitting up.

They told him, at the same time cautioning him against his weakness.

But they had yet much to learn of Springsteel's toughness and resolution.

"Who ran up the ladder for me?" was his next demand. "And what? is that the sailor, Simmons, over yonder, with Black Jerry beside him?"

The last query was answered in the affirmative by the foreman of one of the engine companies, an old friend and admirer of the detective's, who now stepped to his side, with an explanation of the situation.

For a whole day and a night had Springsteel lain there either insensible or delirious, and this new day was the one set for Edgar Willard's formal court examination, pending the action of the Grand Jury of Westchester county—for he had shrewdly surmised in his own mind the day that would be appointed.

But this was nothing now.

There was still time, and wonder of wonders, his two criminal witnesses, both Sailor Simmons and Black Jerry, had remained faithful to their agreement.

"Bad as he is, Tom Simmons ain't the man to abandon a shipmate in distress!" said the sailor, stepping forward—painfully sober at that, though with his own head somewhat bandaged; "especially when that mate has risked his own life to save him from a fire-ship."

In spite of protests on the part of the physician in attendance and others, the old detective pressed down his head-bandages with both hands, and, getting slowly out of bed, began putting on his clothes with precision and dispatch.

"Hank!" said he, to his fireman friend, "try to get leave to come with me. I am going to drive to White Plains with these two men, and don't you forget it."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

THE vitality and resolution of the veteran detective were little short of the incredible.

In less than three hours after rising from his hospital couch, and in spite of the severe shock his toughened system had sustained, he was making his determination good, and on his way to White Plains in an open spring-wagon with Hank Withers, his old fireman friend at his side, and his two witnesses in the back seat.

He had insisted on making the trip by this means, instead of by the cars, from having somehow got into his head the mistaken conviction that the lodging-house must have been fired by some secret agent of O'Meara's, for the express purpose of burning him and the sailor to death, and that there would be a fresh risk of like deadly nature run by taking advantage of the railroad.

"But in this way we'll give the hounds an unexpected surprise, my boy," said he, rubbing his hands quite gleefully. "This is a fine team you've managed to hire for me, Hank. They step right along, and ought to whirl us up to the Plains in less than two hours and a half—in time for court, you know."

Withers, who was handling the lines, and to whom a rough outline of the situation had been duly afforded, responded to his old friend's affability, notwithstanding that the detective cut a rather grotesque figure, with his white head-bandages showing from under his hat, while the sailor presented a somewhat similar appearance on his part.

In obedience to a sort of premonitory caprice, Springsteel directed that a slightly roundabout course be pursued that would cause them to pass the drive-gate of Willard Manse.

While they were bowling along past the point, he suddenly caught sight of a now well-known, if still startling figure, that was about turning leisurely off from the drive into the footpath leading down to Bleak Hollow.

Springing to the ground as soon as the team could be stopped, he was once more in pursuit of the mysterious double, like the wind.

To his astonishment, however, he had no sooner dashed around the turn into the footpath than he found himself calmly confronted by the theretofore slippery fugitive with a sort of expectant air.

"I am glad you're come for me, my friend," said the latter, in a matter-of-fact, business-like tone. "In fact, if you hadn't, you'd have heard from me anyhow."

Edgar's formal court examination was well under way, and, in the continued inexplicable absence of his father-in law, from whose energy and acumen so much had been hoped for, the situation was looking rather unpleasant for him.

It chanced that the presiding judge was, for some reason or other, not friendly to the young master of Willard Manse, and the latter's counsel had vainly pleaded for a postponement of the examination.

O'Meara had given his testimony in a clear and circumstantial manner that no amount of cross-examination could materially shake.

Briefly, this was to the effect that the witness and two other men, since dead, had, on the fatal night, broken into the manse with simply bur-

glorious intent, and had discovered the accused, then answering to the assumed name of Frank Harper, standing, knife in hand, over the freshly murdered body of the proprietor, who had since turned out to have been the accused man's grandfather, though this was not suspected or dreamed of at the time by the three intruders.

The *pseudo* Harper was not unknown to them, he having been their confederate in numerous desperate enterprises theretofore, the extraordinary meeting on this occasion being purely coincidental.

Then followed the association of the four in the crime, the division of the spoil, the burial of the body, the incident of Miss Gray's part in the tragedy (the latter being dwelt upon with truthful minuteness, and artfully connected with the fact of the young lady having since become the wife of the accused), the flight of the trio, and their final dispersion.

In contradiction, the accused made his counter-statement, while O'Meara's generally infamous character was ventilated to the full by Mr. W—.

But this could not alter the seriousness of the charges as set forth in O'Meara's testimony.

Edna was sick at heart with anxiety and suspense, and the spectators were breathlessly listening to the first words of the judge, as a preliminary to holding both prisoners under indictment for trial, when there was a commotion in the crowd, and a man, who was none other than Hank Withers, made his way to Mr. W—, with a piece of writing in his hand.

The lawyer glanced over it, passed it along to Sheriff Langley, who was standing near Edna, and then looked up triumphantly, the Court having in the mean time come to an angry pause.

"A new witness for my client—in fact, for both parties accused, for that matter," he exclaimed.

The Court sat down, disgusted, and announced the reopening of the examination.

"It is distinctly understood, your Honor," continued Mr. W—, "that my client is under examination charged with the murder of his grandfather, John Willard, formerly known as Miser John Willard, of Willard Manse?"

"Of course it is!" replied the Court.

"All right, your Honor," said Mr. W—, "passed up a written name to the clerk. "I then request that the name of our new witness be called."

The clerk arose, calling out in astounded tones: "John Willard, of Willard Manse!"

It was the novel sensation of the dead-alive!

Springsteel was next seen forcing his way up to the bar, with Sheriff Langley's assistance, and followed by three men.

One was an old, white-bearded and white-haired man, with a rather forbidding face.

A roar of recognition greeted this individual as he took the stand, chiefly for the purpose of testifying that he had never been murdered at all, but was still very much alive, if still very aged and eccentric.

It was his crazy twin-brother, Ephraim Willard, who had been murdered in mistake for himself; and since that event he, the supposed murdered man, had seen fit to keep out of sight and mind.

The mystery of the thing had been rather to his liking; he had, moreover, experienced a change of heart with regard to his grandson; secret means sufficient for his frugal wants were at his disposal; and, furthermore, he had been at last enabled to pursue his pet search for Captain Kidd's buried treasure uninterruptedly and at the top of his bent, if not as yet with a full measure of success, though he was still cheerfully hopeful.

This was all the personal information that the dead-alive John Willard, of Willard Manse, would vouchsafe on the present momentous occasion; and he stepped from the stand, to shake hands with his grandson and Edna in a very self-satisfied way, as if he had been intimately and agreeably acquainted with them all his life, and had only just returned from a brief excursion.

O'Meara had started up with a wild look of hope in his haggard face while the dead-alive's extraordinary testimony was being rendered.

But it was only to sink back with a groan as he recognized Simmons and Black Jerry in reserve!

The first-named was the first to testify as to the actual murder of Ephraim Willard, who had received the fatal wound while asleep by O'Meara's own hand; and then followed the continued account whose substance can be readily left to the reader's imagination.

Then Black Jerry had his incriminating say, and the game was all up for O'Meara.

The latter's handcuffs had been temporarily removed, however, and he now made a last desperate break for liberty.

He was only overpowered after a severe struggle, and was summarily remanded to prison, to await his trial for more murders than one.

Sheriff Langley had succeeded in procuring evidence sufficient to charge him with the murder of Miss Raw, while Black Jerry's testimony was sufficient to fasten the kidnapping of the nurse and child, no less than the robbing of

Farmer Webb, to say nothing of other offenses, upon the detestable wretch, and people shudderingly turned from him as a species of inhuman monster, while he was being led off to confinement.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE CLEARING UP.

A MOST extraordinary and radical change had, indeed, been wrought in the whilom miser, John Willard, of Willard Manse.

He cheerfully accompanied the young couple and their father-in-law to the manse, but only for the purpose of informing them that he had no intention of resuming his proprietorship rights in the property.

His treasure-seeking mania had finally even conquered and absorbed his avariciousness *per se*, as it might be called. He had still some little means of his own, he said. And Captain Kidd's buried treasure, which he should presently unearth, would enrich him so enormously that what he was leaving for his grandson's enjoyment would be a mere bagatelle in comparison. In fact, he was seriously thinking of paying the National Debt, but might content himself with merely purchasing the island of Cuba as a country estate. He was not quite certain as yet what he would do with his prospective billions, though the world at large should eventually hear of their disposition in some quarter where they would do the most good.

The old man's evolution from his antecedent inhumanity into something like complacency and right feeling with respect to his grandson, is yet more inexplicable; but it must either be set down as part and parcel of the general change in his insane characteristics—for that he had always been more or less insane there could no longer be a doubt—or be permitted to remain as one of the unraveled psychological mysteries of human nature.

He steadfastly refused to give any satisfactory particulars of the twin brother who had so strangely met a tragic fate in his stead, or of anything else that Miss Raw might have divulged in the way of his family history.

On the day following the court examination, he bade his new-found friends farewell, and mysteriously set forth once more, gripsack, divining-rod and all, on his phantom search for supposititious king's ransoms.

He was found dead, on the storm-beaten sands of Barnegat Bay, on a cold winter morning, three months later, with his silver-tipped magic staff, which had led him such a wild and unavailing quest after what had no existence, still clutched firmly in his shriveled old hand, and with his gripsack, together with a much-used sectional spade, at the edge of a shallow hole in the sand that he had been digging up to his latest gasp.

So Miser John Willard, of Willard Manse, was surely dead at last. His remains were laid away, with brief funeral ceremonies in the family cemetery plot; and, as no will had been left, Edgar was, by right of descent, thenceforth sole and undisputed possessor of the large estate.

Red O'Meara had doubtless come to the conclusion that the only thing left for him was to die game, while affording the community ample food for shuddering reflection, without the intervention of the public hangman's services.

At all events, he was found dead in his cell, the victim of a self-inflicted wound, on the day set for his trial, having left behind him a well-digested, carefully-prepared written confession of his career.

It covered a frank acknowledgment of many crimes, other than those comparatively recent ones for which he had been indicted; the whole comprising a horrifying list, recited with a self-satisfied *sang froid* as to statement and particularization such as to render it a curiosity in the record of human depravity and diabolism.

His widow (for he had really been married to Libby, in New York, and there was no evidence that she had any rival in the unenviable relationship) continued to style herself the Countess Omeerando and to wear deep mourning for a twelvemonth thereafter.

She then discarded both title and weeds to take part in a second clandestine marriage.

This time it was with her father's German hired man, who pretended to be the Baron of Berlin, the Prince von Sourcrout, or something equally plausible (showing Miss Libby as being true to her title-loving instincts to the last), but who turned out to be an absconding and felonious Wurtemberg barber from Stuttgart, whither he was sent back on extradition papers, after a brief and dazzling honeymoon, once more at the unfortunate Farmer Webb's enforced expense, to be heard of no more.

But Libby rather enjoys her notoriety, and big and ponderous as ever, is still a large part of the paternal household, with perhaps yet giddier matrimonial plans for the future.

The arrest of witness Tom Simmons, that naturally enough followed upon his self-incriminating testimony at the court examination, was only permitted to last until Edgar Willard was allowed to go upon his bail in a large amount. A fortnight later the guilty but somewhat repentant ocean wanderer was a dead man

in his parents' cottage, from galloping consumption.

The future comfort of the Simmons couple was secured by Edgar presenting them with a snug little farm in the township of New Castle.

Springsteel Steve managed to keep faith with the scoundrel, Black Jerry, in a rather shady way that detectives are more or less familiar with. At all events, the rascal was permitted to slip out of the prison, to which the nature of his testimony against his former pal had consigned him as a natural consequence, and it was generally known, in certain circles, that he did not disappear penniless.

Justice was not long injured in his case, however, as within less than six months he was tried in Jersey City, on a charge of murderous assault while in the commission of a highway robbery, for which he was duly convicted and is now a life convict in the State's Prison.

After a long and recuperative European tour, Edgar and Edna Willard are once more living in peace and happiness at the old manse.

Willie, the son and heir, is doing finely, and Ex-Detective Stephen Gray, *alias* Springsteel Steve, is still a member of the comfortable household circle, as steel-true and springy as in his golden prime.

Save an occasional run down to New York, or a brief visit to Sheriff Jake Langley (who has at last succeeded in re-entering wedlock's rosy yoke, his life partner being a rich but still buxom widow, with two daughters), or a drive up to the Crystal Springs Hotel, for a chat with its genial and music-loving proprietor, the old fellow seldom leaves his cosey quarters in the bosom of his beloved daughter's family.

But all this after-content has not been secured, we may be sure, without the chastening discipline of repentance, and there still broods over the old place to some extent the lingering shadow of the Bleak Hollow Mystery.

THE END.

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